The future of electronic entertainment issue#135

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Resident Evil 4: how Ca
is reinventing survival h
Previewed: Burnout 3, Dr
Evil Genius, Mashed, Killz
Reviewed: Ninja Gaiden,
Metal Gear Solid: Twin S
Splinter Cell: Pandora T
Plus: Sammy on Sega, th
behind strategy guides, F







The magazine you're holding isn't usually sealed in a bag. But then its cover doesn't usually feature an image of a bag-headed nutcase chewing into a man's throat with a heavy-duty power tool normally used in the relatively non-violent process of felling trees. Apparently family newsagents don't take kindly to such imagery being readily available for the consumption of young, impressionable eyes. Fair enough. We hope the packaging doesn't spoil your enjoyment.

It makes us think a little more about today's videogame content. Clearly we are playing in a new age where everyone wants a slice of the action, whether it's bored pensioners who're looking beyond dominoes for their kicks or children who've grown tired of Spyro and Crash and their happy-jolly worlds of bonkers expressions and silly-crazy 'bad' guys.

But to those who've known the *Resident Evil* series since its inception, the people who've stuck by all of its door-opening loading delays and logic-defying inventories, a new survival-horror game has no novelty value. Or at least that was the theory when we first approached Capcom's newest episode, fully expecting perhaps a different-shaped bucket of blood here and a less-obviously-paced shock there. That's why the game is on this month's cover: it does not follow the series' conventions to the letter, instead attempting to truly turn it on its head. And what better console to do it on than the family-friendly GameCube from Nintendo Company Ltd?

Well, yes.

There's a letter in this month's inbox that speaks of a young boy being bought a copy of *GTA: Vice City* by his mother, fully aware that the game is aimed at over-18s. It makes for slightly disconcerting reading – until you remember the sort of films you found a way of watching when you clearly fell outside of the age rating marked on their boxes.

But that's the appeal of the forbidden. We just hope little Johnny, or whatever his name is, is like us – simply in it for the entertainment. Nothing more, nothing less.



Features











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the not-in-front-of-the-children issue











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"Let's get in that old whirly-bird, find us an island some place, get juiced up and spend what time we got left soakin' up some sunshine! How's that?"

frontend

News and views from e-entertainment's cutting edge



Mobiles prepare for 3D revolution

This year's 3GSM exhibition saw a range of 3D graphics processors competing to revolutionise mobile phone gaming. Where does a fractured industry go from here?

After two years of *Space Invaders* clones and cute platformers, it seems mobile phone gaming is finally set to emerge from its 2D chrysalis. This year's 3GSM exhibition – the mobile industry's packed Cannes gathering – saw no less than five companies showcasing 3D-acceleration solutions specifically designed for handsets. Others premiered just before the event, while a throng of middleware has already grown up around the various competing technologies.

Readers who remember the advent of 3D acceleration technology on the PC during the mid-'90s will recognise the current situation – a crossfire of performance claims and counter-claims, with little actual hard evidence but plenty of incredible promises. Likely to emerge a key player, though, is Cambridge-based tech company ARM, a leading provider of RISC microprocessor solutions to handset manufacturers. The company has announced that it is integrating Imagination Technologies' PowerVR MBX 3D graphics accelerator into its next-generation mobile phone CPU designs. MBX supports all the 3D effects we've come to expect from current PC accelerators (alpha blending, bi- and tri-linear filtering, bump and MIP mapping, etc), and ARM product manager Ed Plowman promises rendering performance somewhere in the region of 500,000 to three million textured polys per second. A somewhat impressive boast.

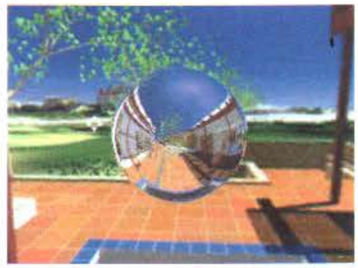
ARM was also the only 3D solution provider at 3GSM to show off a playable game running on its technology – an enhanced version of Ideaworks3d's *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* conversion, last seen on N-Gage (Ideaworks MD **Adrian Sack** claims it is comparable to the Dreamcast version of the game). MBX will also be one of the first 3D solutions to reach the market: although a handset manufacturer has yet to be named, phones incorporating the technology will reportedly be released before the end of the year. ARM has also licensed its MBX design to Texas Instruments. The American semiconductor giant is building the 3D acceleration technology into its exciting OMAP 2 architecture, a range of application processors aimed at high-end phones.

Nvidia, meanwhile, revealed its AR-10 3D graphics core at 3GSM, and this will now be integrated in with the company's GoForce multimedia products, which already boast video capture and playback in CIF resolution (352x288) at 30fps.

"GoForce is the world's first vertex and pixel processing handheld 3D core," says Nvidia's UK marketing manager **Andrew Humber**. "A part of this is multi-texturing, which allows game designers to apply simple colours and textures to a number of polygons, and then lay special effects over the top, such as reflective surfaces, specular highlights, etc. We can also process and accelerate such special effects as fire and smoke, providing a new level of excitement and gameplay to mobile phone games than has not been seen before.".

Interestingly, the company is planning to transfer its 'The Way It's Meant To Be Played' campaign from PC to mobile, working closely with selected developers to get the most out of its 3D hardware. We're expecting some big names from PC and Xbox development to start porting games to mobile platforms as a result.

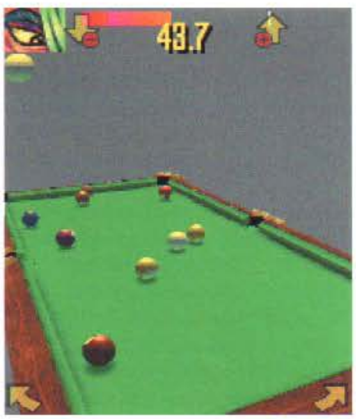
Nvidia was not the first familiar PC name to make the jump to mobile 3D, though. ATI actually announced its Imageon 2300 range of 3D graphics coprocessors in January, promising the usual range of special effects





Nvidia had a range of tech demos at 3GSM, showing off both the graphical effects (top) and 3D gaming (above) capabilities of GoForce

> "All the 3D effects we've come to expect and rendering performance in the region of 500,000 to three million textured polys per second"



Alphamosaic's *3D Pool* title provides a simple example of what the company's VC01 processor can achieve. The framerate is a steady 25-30fps



A very peculiar practice

Designers of 3D processors for mobile phones have to take into consideration the many peculiarities of the mobile phone format. Power consumption is of vital importance: a 3D graphics solution that boasts high poly counts and smooth framerates is no good if it runs down the battery in three hours. Therefore, every company we spoke to reeled off its power-saving measures.

Actually delivering the games to the consumer is another problem area. Currently, GPRS networks limit game downloads to around 250K – anything more would be cripplingly slow. Complex titles designed to push forthcoming 3D technology to the max are likely to weigh in much larger, however. But companies are looking into ways of super-compressing code for over-the-air delivery – Superscape and Ideaworks3D have both achieved interesting results in this area. However, it is looking likely that two levels of 3D mobile gaming will emerge: cheap, simple massmarket titles delivered as downloads from gaming portals, and more sophisticated high-end products that will come on multimedia cards sold through retail outlets (the current N-Gage model), or be delivered via Bluetooth or across wireless LANs – either via your home connection or dedicated kiosks on the shop floor.



Nvidia's GoForce family of coprocessors now has a dedicated 3D graphics element, AR-10, a product of the company's vast PC experience

as well as support for a digital camera and video. The company has yet to announce any detailed 3D benchmarks, and hardware partners have not been named, but a recent press release claimed that shipment of the coprocessors to handset manufacturers would begin in Q1 2004.

Meanwhile, Toshiba's T4G chipset, announced in Tokyo at the same time as 3GSM, combines three accelerators – an MPEG4 codec, 3D graphics engine and the JPEG codec – into another powerful multimedia solution. The company boasts that T4G is "able to process 3.5 million vertices a second and 125 million pixels a second. Embedded DRAM technology facilitates data transfer to the graphic controller at a rate of two gigabytes a second, achieving console-quality video output with low power consumption."

Shipment is expected to begin in Q3 2004, but Toshiba has not yet announced its handset partners.

Finally, there were two slightly different offerings on the show floor. The small Finnish graphics hardware company Bitboys had its Acceleon G30 solution on display. "Our product is not a separate



Adrian Sack, MD of Ideaworks3D, reckons that his company's conversion of *Tony Hawk's Pro Skater* – running on the ARM MBX graphics processor – is comparable to the Dreamcast version of the game

"The mobile phone market is far more fractured than that of the PC, where the Windows and Intel platforms allowed for a level playing field"

coprocessor but an IP core, which we license to silicon vendors to be included in mobile phone silicon chipsets," explains CTO **Petri Nordlund**. It's a lower end solution (Nordlund claims performances similar to the original 3Dfx Voodoo card), but it's cheap and easy to integrate, and therefore aimed at massmarket handsets rather than the top-end smartphones eyed by the likes of Nvidia and TI.

An interesting proposition, but again no handset partners have been named, though Nordlund claims that Acceleon technology will be in mobile phones within two years.

We also met with Alphamosaic, an innovative semiconductor company based in Cambridge. Its VC01 graphics processor is a totally programmable multimedia unit – there are no separate components for, say, 3D graphics or video replay – and the manufacturer can program the technology to specifically meet the needs of individual handsets. High-quality digital video is clearly the priority with this solution, but the company's marketing manager **Chris Boross** is confident about potential 3D performance, saying: "Due to the programmable architecture of the VideoCore hardware, it is difficult to give precise figures for polygon operations. A rough number would be around 250,000 polys per second for on-screen, fully textured, lit and anti-aliased polygons. The demos we showed at 3GSM were running at between 25-30 frames per second."

Indeed, we saw the space shooter demo *Darxide* (produced by Frontier) looking smooth and impressive. As for hardware partners, Samsung's gorgeous camera phone, the SCH-V420 (see p6) – which is available in Korea – already uses a Alphamosaic multimedia processor. GSM handsets for the European market are expected later this year.

So, are we looking at a multiple face-of with several companies plying for market dominance? Probably not. Despite an air o competitiveness at the show, it is unlikely that one or two companies will go on to dominate the entire 3D hardware market – as has happened with the PC. As Sack comments, "The mobile phone market is fa







Alphamosiac has pulled together a range of game demos to show off its VC01 processor technology. Among them are (from left) *Darxide* (by Frontier), *ZooCube* and a firstperson shooter entitled *Project End*





Bitboys' racing car (top) and butterfly (above) demos shows the power of its comparatively low-end graphics solution. The company is aiming its Acceleon graphics technology at massmarket handsets





The translation of *Tony Hawk's* running on ARM's MBX chipset design impressed all at 3GSM

more fractured than that of the desktop PC, where the homogeneous Windows and Intel platforms allowed for a level playing field and where the consumer has been able to make a point-of-purchase decision about the 3D card in their machine.

"Mobile phones are quite different with no less than four major OSes – SymbianOS, Microsoft Smartphone, PalmOS and Mobile Linux – all vying for market share. When buying a mobile phone, consumers seldom specify any of the individual components in their device. Both of these factors make the mobile phone market more likely to adopt a plethora of 3D solutions, with many more small providers finding profitable niches than has been the case on the PC."

Whatever the case, mobile game developers will not be left to decipher the mess of technology alone. Most designers of hardware 3D solutions are aligning themselves with the creators of mobile 3D engines, to create a complete development environment. ARM, for example, is working with UK company Superscape, developer of the Swerve 3D engine, while Texas Instruments lists Criterion (Renderware Mobile), Hi Corp (Mascot Engine) and Fathammer (Xforge 3D) among its partners.

The industry is also grouping together to define a selection of 3D graphics standards, which will allow developers to work across a range of platforms without having to write for dozens of proprietary APIs. OpenGLes, for example, is going to be a major aid to those writing games in native code (ie C++), while the recently defined JSR 184 is a 3D graphics API for developers of Java titles.

Mobile 3D technology is currently in its infancy, with plenty of promise and some interesting solutions but very little in the way of end product. ARM, a company that provides IP rather than actually manufacturing processors, is clearly the furthest along in providing evidence of its 3D aspirations – its solutions are already in devices such as the Tapwave Zodiac and the forthcoming Gametrac.

As the consistent failure to sort out MMS interoperability has proved, nothing makes sense in this industry, and nothing should be taken for granted.



Hi-res video capture and playback are now high on the agenda of mobile graphics companies

CUTTINGS



New GTA offers no surprises

As widely rumoured, the new *GTA* game is called *Grand Theft Auto: San Andreas* and will be released by Rockstar on October 22.

The title will be available exclusively for PlayStation2, although as with *Vice City*, PC and Xbox versions are expected at a later date. For *San Andreas*, read San Francisco, a location that could well make for steep inclines and trolleybus crashes.

Rockstar has not revealed details of the game's historical setting, but we'd like to see the action take place in the late 1960s, when San Francisco became a centre for the psychedelic counter-culture. The gothic logo suggests an LA metal vibe, however, so it's likely that we're jumping the gun.

BAFTA breaks clean sweep trend

The big winner at the inaugural game BAFTAs, *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*, narrowly missed out on a clean sweep. Nominated in six categories, it lost out to *Soul Calibur II* in the Animation and Intro section, but took home gongs for Sound, Design and Best PS2, PC and Action Game as well as the 'Sunday Times' Readers' Award.

Despite the *GTA* landslide, *Call Of Duty* was named Best Game. Double winners were *Advance Wars 2* (Strategy and Best GBA Game) and *EyeToy: Play* (Children's and Technical Achievement). Other awards included *Knights Of The Old Republic* (Best Xbox Game), *Metroid Prime* (Best GameCube Game), *Zelda: The Wind Waker* (Best Adventure Game) and *Project Gotham Racing 2* (Best Racing Game). A lifetime achievement award went to Chris Deering, boss of Sony Europe and former president of SCEE, for his contribution to gaming.

EA blurs Hollywood/videogame line

The world's most powerful thirdparty publisher tells a BAFTA audience how it's taking games to the movies thanks to a selection of ex-Hollywood talent

Reversing the trend

The brain drain isn't only from films to games. One UK developer prepared to spend time and money gaining experience in movie making is Rebellion. Alongside its game production and '2000AD' publishing arms, CEO **Jason Kingsley** has quietly sent up Fearnort Productions.

"Whilst Fearnort is not as big or successful as the other divisions, we have made 'Parasite', a full-length, live-action horror movie which has been sold and is being distributed world-wide," he says. "I think that counts as a commercial and financial success, especially when compared to some bigger budget movies."

It's not just the commercial or even the fun aspects of film-making that Kingsley thinks important. "There's a ton of complimentary skills to be swapped and borrowed from both industries," he argues. "Making 'Parasite' we've learned about presentation and story development, editing, production, atmospheric lighting techniques and most importantly, getting the best out of actors."



As well as being on the big screen at BAFTA Interactive, Rebellion's CEO Jason Kingsley has been looking towards the movies by setting up Fearnort, a film production company

In the appropriate setting of the British Academy of Film and Television Arts' Princess Anne Theatre, the world's dominant game publisher, EA, threw down a challenge for the rest of the industry. The occasion was its keynote at the recent BAFTA Interactive conference, where instead of spouting the usual homilies of game and film convergence, the company unveiled some of the serious Hollywood talent it has recruited to push gaming's visual quality to another level.

One example is EA's chief visual officer **Glenn Entis**. A co-founder of pioneering special effects house Pacific Data Images, he joined EA four years ago. "Game graphics are catching up to those we see in films very quickly," he argued. "I think there's massive growth potential."



Another recent convert is two-time BAFTA winner **Habib Zargarpour**. Now EA Canada's senior art director, he has been working on *James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing* and claims the game boasts the most actors ever. Indeed, the production cycle has been more akin to that of a film than a game. Not only do the likenesses and audio talents of Bond stalwarts such as Pierce Brosnan, John Cleese and Dame Judi Dench feature, but Willem Dafoe, Heidi Klum, Shannon Elizabeth and Mya also play key roles as the latest set of Bond baddies and love interests. Richard Kiel makes a welcome return as Jaws, while the scriptwriter is 'GoldenEye', 'Tomorrow Never Dies' and 'The World Is Not Enough' veteran Bruce Feirstein. Against this backdrop even EA's marketing strap – 'the only Bond movie this year!' – seems somehow justified.

Zargarpour, a nine-year veteran of Industrial Light and Magic who has worked on films such as 'The Perfect Storm' and 'Twister', revealed some of the techniques he has been implementing. "We're prerendering scenes to get the look and feel right and then using that knowledge to ensure our realtime visuals look as good," he explained. The first game to undergo such treatment was surprise Christmas hit *Need For Speed: Underground*, for which effects such as motion blur, depth of field and environmental lighting were prototyped using movie-CG techniques. "I took a lot of the experience I'd learned from creating the pod-racing sequence in 'Star Wars: Episod One,'" Zargarpour said.

A similar approach is being applied to *Everything Or Nothing*, for which Zargarpou headed up the visuals on the game's driving elements, which include various cars, a motorbike, a tank, a helicopter and a remote-controlled robot. Other techniques include the use of 2D mattes, or detailed background textures, which can be swapped for 3D geometry as the player gets closer to them. This ensures processing power, particularly that of the memory-constrained PlayStation2, is used as efficiently as possible. "It's taken a lot of work to get the game's lighting and rendering effects to the standard we want," he said, arguing that the effort would be worth it, despite the requirement to limit the game to 30fps.

"We're looking to recruit stars from the film business to work in games, and speed up the convergence between the two industries"

EA is also employing its newfound knowledge in the production of the *Catwoman* game, which is being carried ou by its Chertsey office and external develope Argonaut. "I've spent one week in four on the film set," explained **John Miles**, the game's senior art director at EA. "I've great access to the director, Pitof, as well as the production designer and visual effects supervisor. I've even had a couple of meetings with Halle Berry." Access to concept art and the pre-visualisation of







special effects has been provided as well, while the hand animated movement of the Catwoman character was influenced by motion-capture sessions for the film.

"We're looking to recruit stars from the film business to work in games, and speed up the convergence between the two industries," concluded **David Byrne**, head of development at EA UK. "Last month Mike Talarico, who has done everything from being a blue screen cameraman to miniatures and high-speed shoots as well as visual effects supervisor and lighting director of photography, joined to work as a CG supervisor on 'Harry Potter.'" Similarly, Frank Kitson, who was visual effects supervisor on the first 'Tomb Raider' film, amongst others, is a key part of the *Catwoman* development team.



At the recent BAFTA Interactive conference, EA showed off some of the talent it has recruited from the movie industry. This included chief visual officer Glenn Entis (second from right) and senior art director Habib Zargarpour (far left) from *Everything Or Nothing*





Though *Everything Or Nothing* is only an average title in terms of enjoyment, EA is marketing it as 'the only Bond movie this year!' And with Bond favourites such as Pierce Brosnan, John Cleese and Jaws, not to mention Willem Dafoe, Heidi Klum and Mya appearing in both virtual and audio likenesses, it certainly boasts suitably high-end production values

Back on the small screen

While the videogame industry is mostly focused on film licences, the success of BBC2 show 'Time Commanders' demonstrates the potential of television. During a BAFTA session on the project, Cassian Harrison, head of special projects at production company Lion TV, which made the 16-programme series for the BBC, said that while audience figures were average for a show in that time slot, the audience appreciation figures were 'through the roof.' Discussions over a second series are currently ongoing. Tim Ansell, MD of Creative Assembly, the game developer who provided the 3D engine behind the series, also revealed that the technology will be used for a forthcoming documentary series for the History Channel in the US. The 13-part series mixes CG-generated footage of ancient battles created using the company's *Rome: Total War* engine with a live-action presenter.



Lion TV's Cassian Harrison approached Creative Assembly to use its *Rome: Total War* engine to create BBC2 series 'Time Commanders'







Arcade gaming reshuffles in Japan

Cards become major focus at AOU show, where examples of innovation from the likes of Sega are thin on the ground





Taito's *Zoids Infinity* brings the popular robot licence to a clone of *Virtual On*. The game proved popular throughout the show

Nobody expects too much from the first Japanese arcade show of the year – traditionally it's too early for major new products to be revealed and becomes an arena of bluff and counter-bluff. The hope is that there are some dreamers brave enough to submit their visions of the arcade industry's next step, and Sega generally proves to be the dreamiest of all – or at least a barometer by which the industry's health can be measured. It says much, then, that its contribution to AOU 2004 was merely to update its most popular card games.

Perhaps that's less their fault than a directional shift in Japanese arcade gaming which, like its western equivalent, is moving towards the mainstream. Trading card games are very much part of that, and were visible everywhere across the show, adaptations touching countless genres, from fantasy to soccer to professional wrestling. Another mark of the mainstream is the touch screen, now replacing joysticks and buttons as the input method du jour. Mah jong cabinets use that to refine their mainstream appeal still further – they, along with those pervasive card machines, are management games paced so players have time to judge their next move, and touch-screen technology suits them perfectly. Often networked together around one larger display screen, arcades are beginning to draw a different kind of client, and these games are the reason, the focus, the replacement for driving and lightgun games. Elsewhere, UFO catchers – the seaside steel-claw grab machines that exchange your money for unsaleable tat – were littered across the show floor, their appeal apparently as strong as ever.

Will it surprise anyone if we note that fewer videogames than ever were displayed during AOU '04? Even Capcom, for so long a highlight of these shows, has shifted its attention to the prize game business.



Trading card games dominated the show floor at this year's AOU, with examples from all major outfits. A shift back towards traditional arcade gaming is expected when new consoles appear

"Japanese arcade gaming, like its western equivalent, is moving towards the mainstream. Trading card games are very much part of that"

Arcade technology used to lead, but now companies like Namco are stalling from releasing new versions of their games, biding time until the next generation of consoles arrive. The PS3 is a long way off, and now the industry rests in limbo, illustrated by Sega's short video of *Virtua Fighter 4: Final Tune*. It revealed two things: first, that there will be no Naomi 3 in 2004, and second, that Naomi 2 is on the way out.

To add to the confusion, Sammy's purchase of CSK's Sega stocks means that it now controls the leading arcade company in the world, but it also seems reluctant to make changes, possibly since Sega is still in the middle of a very delicate restructuring and recovery program. Its reticence meant most arcade operators had second-guessed that Sammy's own Atomiswave board, a cut-down Dreamcast with ROM cartridges, was about to be axed. It's an expensive, underpowered system, and the games on show – Sammy's own *Force Five* and *The Rumble Fish* – failed to impress, Japanese showgoers pointing towards tired mechanics as the games' standout flaws.

Post-show, we conducted an (admittedly unscientific) survey of a handful of arcades across Tokyo, and Atomiswave cabinets seemed generally unpopular, games like the Neo-Geo's *KOF 2003* attracting more attention than, say, *Guilty Gear Isuka*.

During the show, Sammy and SNK Playmore made a joint announcement concerning their first three titles to be developed – and announced they would all be released on Atomiswave. *KOF 2004*, *Metal Slug 6*, and *Samurai Spirit AW* will all appear on Sammy's mutated Dreamcast, signalling the official end of a much-loved piece of gaming hardware. The Neo-Geo



Atomiswave had a large presence at the Sammy stand. The hardware looks set to take over from Neo-Geo in arcades as SNK withdraws from hardware production to concentrate on software



Sega watchers believe that the Naomi 3 board may be around the corner, but seems unlikely for 2004. Naomi 2 also seems to be in trouble, with the Dreamcast-based Atomiswave on the scene

and its MVS board are dead, *Samurai Spirits Zero Plus* being the last title for both systems, and SNK officially retiring from the hardware business to concentrate on its software IP.

Were the show-floor rumours of a new Sammy console based on the Atomiswave board – a spiritual replacement for the Neo Geo, to be built by Sega – just a fictional comfort blanket for tearful SNK fans? Logic suggests that the prospect of a new cartridge-based console for home users seems remote at best.

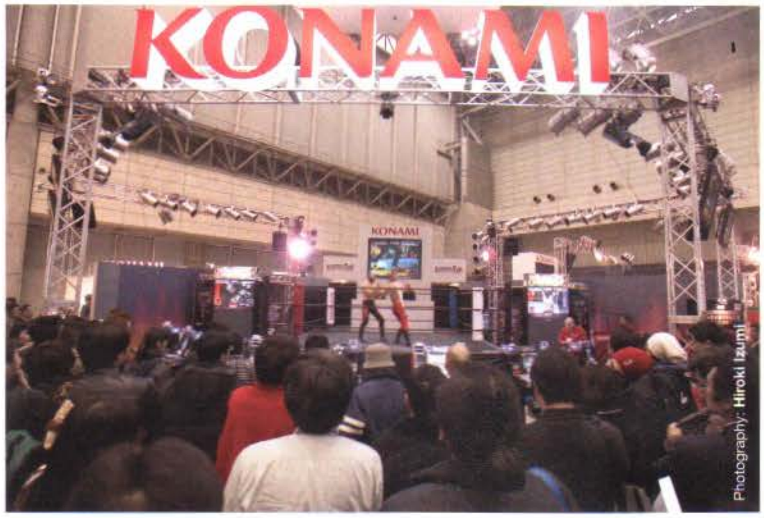
The power of Zoids

Elsewhere, Taito used Sega's lack of impetus to woo *Virtual On* players with *Zoids Infinity*. A clone of the mech hit with near-identical controls and a similar interface, the game met with a great reception during the show and should prove successful, at least until a new *Virtual On* appears. Namco's wait-state was only broken by rumours of *Tekken 5*, although it's still too early to judge whether the game will appear on System 246 or a new PS3-modelled board. The upcoming JAMMA show may prove more revealing.

Konami's show space was also disappointing, offering a raft of updates to its music titles and a new version of sub-par multiplayer lightgun game *Wartran Troopers*. Collectible card game *Battle Climaxx* used wrestling as its background, and (like most wrestling games) lacked any real entertainment value. EA also made a surprise appearance at the show via Able Corporation, a small Japanese manufacturer that has produced an arcade version of its *Need For Speed* licence. Feedback from players was good, but good may not be quite enough to make money in the oversubscribed racer market.

And so, once more, we look to Sega, and the company's few announcements of import. Perhaps most comforting was the news that Sega-AM2 and Hitmaker will continue as (principally, at least) arcade game developers first and foremost. *Virtua Fighter 4* is the company's biggest PS2 game in Japan, and *Initial D: Arcade Stage* is hugely popular in the territory and across Asia, so the policy seems born from common sense rather than any gloriously self-sacrificial creative commitment to the arcade industry. There was little else for videogame fans to be thrilled about, perhaps slightly worrying for those who believe that where Sega goes, others follow. However, that the company's card games have all received facelifts for 2004 while their videogame brands have stalled may not be altogether disheartening.

What Sega fans want most of all is new hardware for the company's best designers to work with, and an optimist could see a creative pause in the videogame division as an indication that Naomi 3 is just around the corner. Meanwhile, voices within Sega are requesting time to develop 'classic' videogames – scrolling shooters and puzzle games, a neglected form that requires less development time and less powerful hardware. It's possible that, in the short term before the next major change in hardware strikes at least, this is the direction in which Sega will head – and if Sega is the industry barometer, then it's one that may please fans of arcade gaming's classic era most of all.











Konami's stand showcased music, lightguns and card collecting, but little in the way of new videogames. Surprise entrant EA supplied an arcade version of the *Need For Speed* franchise

BBC builds Fightbox for kids

The convergence of television and computer games continues apace thanks to the UK broadcaster's ongoing commitment



One of the key aspects of 'Bamzooki' is that the players don't have control over their Zooks, as basic AI keeps them heading in the right direction. Shows are shot in realtime





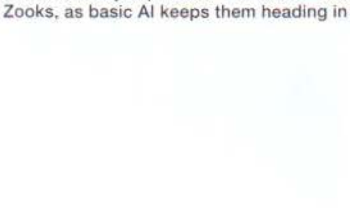


Having created four Zooks before the show, the teams have to pick a different contestant for each challenge. Each week, the winning team goes on to play against a celebrity team

The convergence of computer games and TV shows is pitted with brave experiments, might-have-beens and should-have-done-betters. Yet with games becoming ever more massmarket, broadcasters remain keen to crack the problem, and the latest attempt is 'Bamzooki'. Pitched somewhere between a virtual version of 'Robot Wars' and *Pokémon*, it started a four-week run on the Children's BBC digital channel on March 8.

Paul Tyler, the show's producer and director, says the show's format takes on board lessons of the past: "Watching

"It's great because the kids are engrossed in the show. It's also easier for the viewers to get their heads around what's going on"



Part of the show's appeal with children is the expansive range of creature types

someone play a computer game on a television show is boring," he explains. "Computer games are about a one-on-one relationship between the player and the game, while TV is a one-on-many relationship between the show and the audience." It's for this reason that the two teams of children in each 15-minute episode don't have direct control of their CG creatures, which are called Zooks. Instead, each of the 32 teams competing in the series comes to the show having built four Zooks beforehand using a PC-based creation program.

Developed by Gameware, the Cambridge-based studio which emerged from the ashes of Creature Labs, this program lets the teams experiment with different styles and shapes. "You build the Zooks from simple blocks which can be stretched, moulded and coloured," says Gameware's **Dylan Banarse**. "Then you add as many legs as you want and define how the Zooks will move."

Each show consists of four bouts between the Zooks, testing speed, agility and strength. The winning team each week goes on to play against a celebrity Zook team on BBC1. "The approach is akin to letting kids create a selection of clockwork toys, which they wind up and let go," Tyler says. "It's great because the kids are bringing their own Zooks into the studio so they are emotionally engrossed in the show. I think it's also easier for the viewers to get their heads around what's going on."

Another important technology in this respect is the BBC's FreeD system, which allows the live-action studio and CG characters to be composited together in realtime. This means the cameramen can see both the teams and the Zooks in their viewfinders, ensuring the show is recorded in a natural manner. A top-down version of the CG action is projected on to the contest table, so everyone in the studio can follow the action as it happens. "It's taken five years to get 'Bamzooki' onto TV," Tyler says. "There are lots of ways we can expand the concept. I think it will appeal to a much broader age range than just CBBC viewers so hopefully this will be just the start."

Work has already begun on a second series and the 'Bamzooki' creation software is available from CBBC's website at www.bbc.co.uk/cbbc/games

Submissions for teams to enter the second series will open shortly.

Xbox 2 dev kits are go

Microsoft ships preliminary next-generation hardware, and developers move to get early prototypes noticed

Microsoft has stolen a march on Sony and Nintendo by supplying Xbox 2 development kits to companies across America and Europe, with codeshops in Japan expected to take delivery shortly.

The setup comprises dual Power Macintosh G5s running a custom-configured Windows NT operating system. The graphics-processing solution is currently via ATi's Radeon 9800 (R350) set, which will soon be superseded by a custom iteration of the company's technology.



Getting developers to talk about the Xenon dev kit (as it's now officially been dubbed by Microsoft) has proved difficult, however. "The non-disclosure agreement is like nothing you've seen," said one source.

One company representative who was willing to speak said that his team was using the Xenon SDK to create prototypes which were being passed back and forth on a weekly basis with Microsoft, which is in the process of attempting to sign up exclusives for the platform. On the topic of the console's reputed lack of hard drive, he would only say: "Well, the games we're looking into don't require a hard drive..."

Early Xenon demos are expected to be shown at the Game Developers Conference in late March. We'll have a full report from San Jose next month.

In other new-hardware news, Sony has confirmed that its PSP handheld will support connectivity with PS2 and PSX. Certain games, the company suggested, will be playable on both PS2 and PSP, with users downloading saved data to the handheld device in order continue gaming sessions on the move.



Take two G5s, stitch them together, and what have you got? A Xenon dev kit. Well, nearly

Sony is also said to be discouraging PS2 ports to PSP, despite it being an easy revenue stream for the console.

Finally, sources claim that at least 25 UK developers are now in possession of PSP software development kits.

Recently reviewed

Title	Platform	Publisher	Developer	Score
Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles	GameCube	Nintendo	Square Enix	6
Armed And Dangerous	Xbox/PC	Activision	Planet Moon Studios	7
Forbidden Siren	PlayStation2	SCEE	SCEJ	7
SOCOM II: US Navy SEALs	PlayStation2	SCEE	Zipper Interactive	6
James Bond 007: Everything Or Nothing	PS2/Xbox/GC	EA	In-house	5
Carve	Xbox	Take Two	Argonaut	7
Nightshade	PlayStation2	Sega	Sega WOW	6
Otogi 2	Xbox	From Software	In house	8
Sonic Heroes	Xbox/PS2/GC	Sega	Sonic Team	5
Goblin Commander: Unleash The Horde	Xbox/PS2/GC	Jaleco	In house	5
Kya: Dark Lineage	PlayStation2	Atari	Eden Studios	5
Mafia	PS2/Xbox	Take Two	Illusion Softworks	5
Whiplash	Xbox/PS2/GC	Eidos	Crystal Dynamics	5
Romance Of The Three Kingdoms VIII	PlayStation2	Koei	In house	6
Bujingai	PlayStation2	Taito	Red Storm	7
Hyper Street Fighter II Anniversary Edition	PlayStation2	Capcom	In house	8
Puyo Pop Fever	Xbox/PS2/GC	Sega	In house	7



Everything Or Nothing



Nightshade



Kya: Dark Lineage



Hyper Street Fighter II AE

CUTTINGS



Konami's very modest ship comes in

Paying for your game in instalments (as in the *.hack* series, see p108) is one thing; paying for it in advance is quite another. As reported by video-fenky.com, Konami's trial of such a system has concluded with modest success.

Fans of the *Tokimemo* dating games were invited to contribute to the Game Fund Tokimeki Memorial in order to finance continuing development of the series. This wasnt a pocket-money affair – the minimum contribution was ¥500,000 (around £2,500) and nearly 3,000 *Tokimemo* devotees invested in the scheme. The results, nearly four years later, are in. Having used the cash to produce two games (*Tokimeki Memorial 3* and *Tokimeki Memorial Girl's Side*), Konami was able to return a grand ¥10,088 for every ¥10,000 invested. Contributors also get a mention in the credits and – you would hope – a free copy of the game.

It's hardly a triumph, but at a time when the question of how to fund niche games is becoming more pressing by the month, even a moderate success in gamer-funded console development is worthy of note.

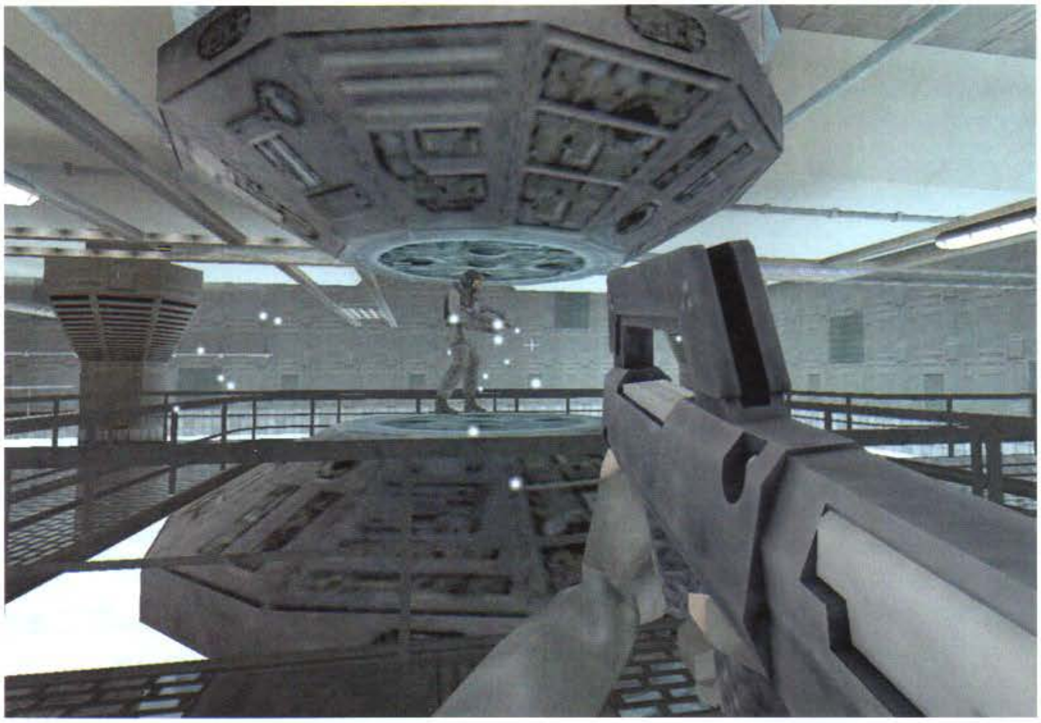
GoldenEye lives twice

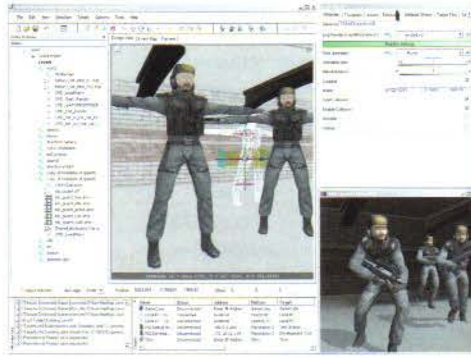
The sequel to N64 classic *GoldenEye* has finally been announced seven years on by rights-holder EA – although *GoldenEye 2* will have very little in common with its predecessor. For a time it was thought that the job of coding the game would be given to Free Radical, whose founders worked on the original game while at Rare. Instead, *Medal Of Honor* studio EA LA will design the multiformat game, which casts you as an enemy agent in the Bond universe.

www.renderware.com

Return to the studio system

Good for the present, Criterion's development framework RenderWare Studio 2 also provides next-gen potential







As a collaborative game development framework RenderWare Studio allows developers to decouple the game-making process from the technology which underpins it. A realtime system, it also means designers can create, tweak and play their levels simultaneously

Straight out of the box

One interesting addition to Studio 2 is the first of Criterion's genre packs. With an eye to the growing commercial requirements for fast and cheap prototyping, these kits are designed to get developers up and running as quickly as possible. For example, the First Person Shooter pack contains a pre-built game engine, a focused game framework with examples of AI, physics, sound, game logic, animation control, pickups, weapons and effects. A playable game level with tutorials to enable designers to create gameplay without requiring help from a programmer is included, too.

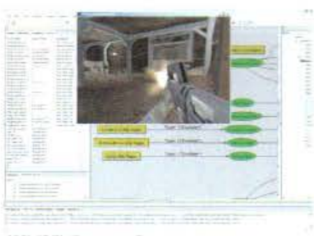
This year is proving tricky for developers and publishers. Increasing uncertainty over the timing and architecture of the next wave of game consoles is good news for development tool vendors, however. The latest release from Guildford's Criterion seems likely to keep the self-styled standard bearers of middleware ahead of the pack.

"RenderWare Studio 2 is at the forefront of Criterion's drive to support current multiplatform development as well as solve the multi-generation conundrum everyone faces," explains **Graeme Williams**, the company's head of product management. "It's been designed to handle massive data sets, parallelism in architecture and huge calls on visual effects."

Developed as a collaborative framework which integrates with standard RenderWare modules such as graphics, physics, AI and audio, one of the neat features of RenderWare Studio is its level of abstraction. Instead of requiring teams to create specific versions for each platform, it allows them to focus on making a game. The vagaries of processing and compiling assets for individual PC, Xbox, PS2 and GameCube versions can be handled automatically within the framework. It will be possible to add modules designed for PlayStation3 or Xbox2 as required, limiting the need to recode or reprocess games to deal with any potentially exotic architecture.

In a sense, RenderWare Studio offers an element of future-proofing, but this doesn't mean the new release of Studio doesn't contain any new goodies for today's hardware. One enhancement is a sequencer tool, which enables artists to choreograph objects over time for cut-scene creation. Other additions include a trigger volume editor, lightmap tool and AI path manager. Criterion is also keen to talk about improvements to its physics module, which can now handle the complex calculations required to model hundreds of ragdoll characters on the screen, even running at 60 frames per second on PlayStation2.

Williams argues that while game development will always involve technology, it is becoming less important: "More teams are recognising that the industry is about creativity," he says. "Through using tools like RenderWare Studio, they can concentrate on gameplay and content and drive the uniqueness and originality of their titles."



The FPS pack for Studio 2 enables developers to get working quickly

www.vicon.com

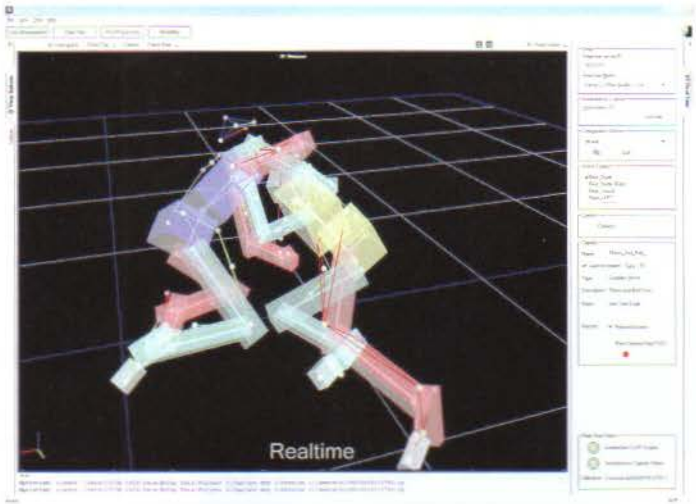
Acting up

Thanks to its iQ processing software, optical motion capture specialist Vicon is demystifying the once black art

Like reactions to tasting a certain yeast-based savoury spread, the technique of motion capture tends to provoke strong opinions. Unlike Marmite, however, motion capture (or mocap) is keen to boost its popularity, particularly with the animators who make up its biggest market.

"In the past, I think we've deserved our reputation," muses **David Lowe**, of Oxford-based optical motion capture vendor Vicon. "I can remember discussions with game companies where we'd hand over the set of 3D points we'd recorded from an actor and just let developers to get on with it. They'd have to work out how to apply that motion to drive the character skeletons that would actually appear ingame. We've since spent a lot of time trying to bridge the gap."

Combined with the growing popularity of realistically focused games, particularly military-style simulators, the effort has proved a good investment. Games such as *Unreal Tournament 2004*, *kill.switch* and *Operation Flashpoint 2* are using Vicon equipment to generate large volumes of animation quickly. Usage also remains high among more traditional mocap markets such as sports games, with Microsoft's Xbox title *Top Spin* the latest to boast of its verisimilitude.



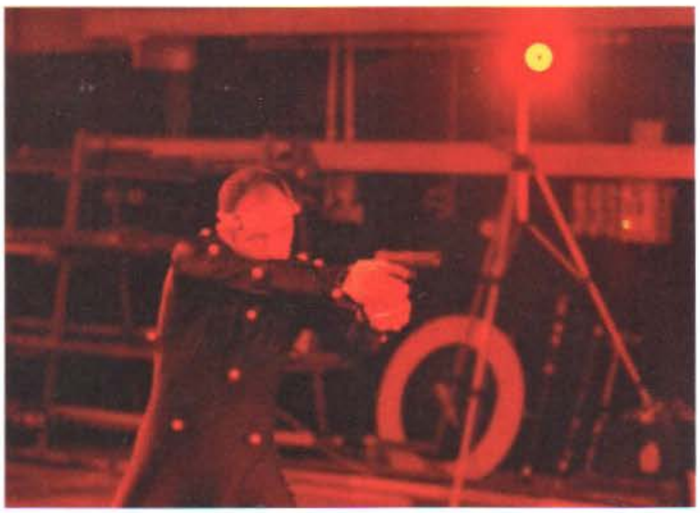
One of the key improvements Vicon has made concerns the tolerance of optical mocap to errors. Unlike the rival technique of magnetic motion capture, optical systems rely on maintaining line-of-sight between the markers on an actor's suit and the tracking cameras. Lose sight of a marker and that part of the actor's anatomy disappears, leaving a gap in the motion.

This problem has partly been solved by increasing the capability of the cameras: Vicon's top-end million-pixel MCam 2 can run at up to 1,000Hz. This means only two cameras are required to generate good tracking data.

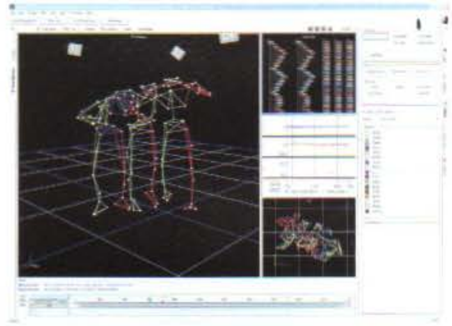
The other breakthrough has been the company's iQ software. Labelled an intelligence-based motion data processing application by Lowe, this long-awaited software package is providing the missing link between recording actor motion and driving ingame skeleton movement. Consisting of several modules, it handles all parts of the mocap process from realtime visualisation to diagnostic tools and batch post-processing.

"Post-processing is where the power of the software lies," Lowe explains. "Artists can create custom pipelines where the motion data is automatically processed, cleaned up and made ready to be imported into their standard animation package."

One crucial element is iQ's ability to fill the gaps when markers are lost. Depending on the number of frames to be filled, this can be handled by extrapolation using simple spline curves. More complex gaps can be reconstructed by applying motion generated from that of nearby markers. "Using such processes, we find we can fill around 95 per cent of data gaps automatically," Lowe says. "IQ has really given developers the ability to take mocap data and drive their skeletons simply and quickly."



Tight black lycra, shiny markers, red strobe lights and a man with a gun – it's all in a day's work for studios such as Audio Motion, where Swordfish is capturing for *Cold Winter*





One of the hardest tasks for optical motion capture is handing multiple characters, but thanks to its iQ software package, Vicon thinks it's cracked the problem

Caught in the act

One developer making full use of Vicon's motion-capture equipment is Swordfish Studios, which has been working at Oxford-based Audio Motion for its forthcoming shooter *Cold Winter*. The design of the game gives players seven-way analogue movement, as well as the ability to shoot, reload or throw grenades no matter whether they are jumping, crouching or running backwards. This means short clips of motion that can be daisy-chained together have been recorded. The advantage of motion capture is the speed at which large volumes of data can be generated. Working with an experienced ex-special forces soldier, upwards of 200 separate pieces of animation were captured in one day.

OUT THERE

REPORTAGE

01



These are the Grunts, looking tooled-up and hard as nails. Shoot the Elite (not pictured) and they'll run away



The green fellow with the visor? Master Chief, aided here by two marines. The Grunts don't stand a chance





The Pillar Of Autumn. Cue a long, lingering bass note from the sub-woofer, possibly also created from Lego

02



The Quiz Show's suitably cheesy host, looking like a cross between Eamonn Holmes and, oddly, Agent 47



He just needs the red tie. And the gun, of course. Anyway, here we seem to have won something. Cool

01 Block rockin' Chiefs

US: Justin 'Saber-Scorpion' Stebbins is 17 years old and from Virginia. He likes videogames and Lego. Us too, as it happens, though we haven't ever combined the two skills quite as effectively as this. Stebbins' website, www.saber-scorpion.com, contains several pages of Lego scultpures based on *Halo* and the *Metal Gear* games. From the smallest grunt through an almost-functional Scorpion tank up to a (brutally miniaturised) Pillar Of Autumn, his *Halo* brick-building exploits are as inspirational as the *Ikaruga* Lego sculptures of a few months ago. His *MGS2* ones, too, have impressed globally – when series director Hideo Kojima got a glimpse of the project, he sent Saber-Scorpion a signed *Twin Snakes* promotional envelope. Aside: Stebbins' site also contains his own D&D character stats. He's chaotic good, in case you were wondering. Again, us too.

02 I'll have a P, please, Bob

Japan: Those who feared the days of the crazy cabinet were over evidently reckoned without Hitmaker, whose newest arcade game breaks new territory for pointless plastic. *The Quiz Show* simulates the experience of being on, well, a quiz show, and takes place on an appropriately themed (and ludicrously large) gameshow-style set. Players watch a wheel (of fortune, presumably) spin, and answer themed questions according to where the wheel stops. Perhaps this is the direction the pub quiz machine's going, although we can't exactly see the flamboyant setup working down the Dog & Basket.

Soundbytes

""As you scale up to larger and larger systems, you can probably model large trends such as how many times out of 1,000 will there be a coup in the United States. What the Iraqi resistance will do over the next month is based on thousands of tiny local factors that seem to always be in flux and are too granular to be modelled."
Will Wright on using videogame AI to model real-world situations.

"It is a possibility for the future"
Superior Interactive owner Richard Hansom on a modern update of Superior Software's gaming landmark, *Exile*. Please, please, please...

""The sales are in the lower quartile of the bracket we had as our goal"
Nokia's chairman, Jorma Ollila, takes a more realistic approach to N-Gage sales figures.

"It is a nasty and vicious way of prejudicing young minds for the rest of their lives."
Labour MP Ian Watson talks about the contribution Eidos' *Whiplash* has made to the animal testing debate. The game features scenes with hamsters being fired from cannons.

03 Even more Super Mario World

US: FuSoYa's Niche (fusoya.cg-games.net/) contains a range of ROM hacks that do neat and interesting things to console games of yesteryear. By far the most impressive, though, is Lunar Magic, a fully featured level editor for *Super Mario World*. Finished in December last year, Lunar Magic's point-'n'-click user interface allows wannabe Miyamotos to carve their own scrolling sections of the Mushroom Kingdom, altering anything from power-up placement to the shape of the world itself. Sprite and animation editing functions are also available, as is a fantastic demo which shows just what you can achieve. We look forward to seeing your efforts in our inbox: edge@futurenet.co.uk

04 Tempest 2K4

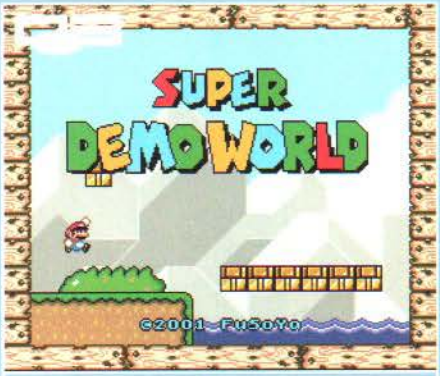
UK: "I know that you're always looking for excuses to stick *Tempest* into your Out There section," says Graeme Sutherland in his email to us, "so here's another one." Oh, do come on, Graeme, how easy do you think we are? Sure, the magazine fell in love at first wave with the Dave Theurer original, and each successive Minter interpretation has pummelled the collective's senses into hallucinogenic submission, but it's not like we are *Tempest* sluts, or anything. Give us *some* credit. Anyway, Sutherland continues: "I'm currently finishing off a J2ME (Java Mobile) port of the game for iFone, and here's a couple of very bad screenshots." *Tempest*? On a mobile? Good god, man, why didn't you say? Stop the presses and point us towards the nearest iFone retailer. We have some shopping to do.

05 Geeks, rhymes and life

UK: Designed by Luke Whittaker and a team from Bournemouth University, *A Break In The Road* won an award for innovation at the Submerge 2003 festival, came second in the British Interactive Media Association 2003 awards, and has been nominated at the International Europrix in Vienna. It's easy to see why – Flash cinematic presentation grabs the player from the outset, and while the core of the game is like *Myst* crossed with Music 2000, the neat concept and fantastic animation are more than enough to keep you playing. "It's a different way, and hopefully an exciting way, of looking at gaming," claims Whittaker. Try it here: www.lukewhittaker.co.uk/breakintheroad

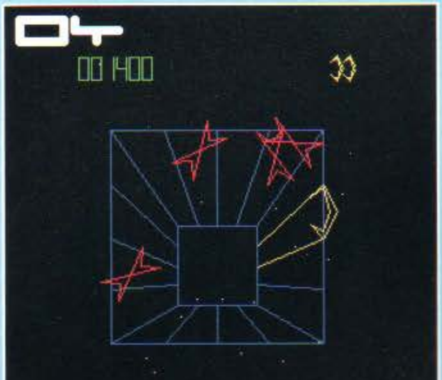
Data Stream

Estimated TV audience for the 76th Academy Awards: **1bn**
Estimated TV audience for the first BAFTA Games Awards: **not many**
Number of Oscar nominations for 'LOTR: The Return Of The King': **11**
Number of Oscar wins for 'LOTR: The Return Of The King': **11**
Number of BAFTA nominations for *LOTR: The Return Of The King*: **1**
Number of BAFTA nominations for *LOTR: The Return Of The King*: **0**
Estimated value of BAFTA award: **£380**
Estimated value of Oscar statuette: **$18,000**
Cost of seat at BAFTA Game Awards: **£293.75**
Cost of seat at Oscars: **fame**



Super Demo World, a crafty new version of *Super Mario World* made with the Lunar Hack level editor





And talking of new versions, Atari's classic shooter *Tempest* is being ported to Java-enabled mobiles

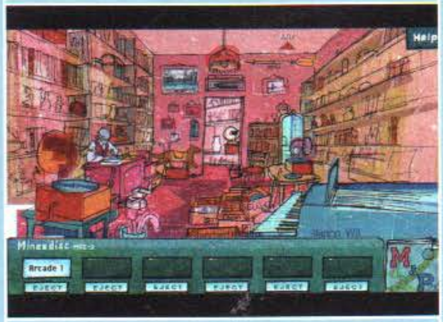






Trying out your work in *A Break In The Road*. It functions like many Flash-powered music curios, but it looks great



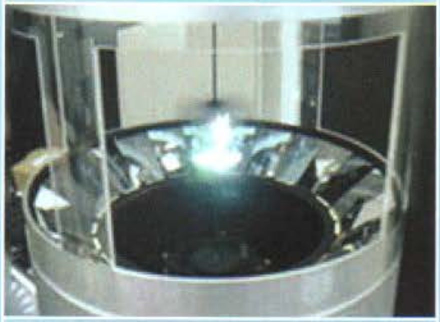


Sounds can be recorded from a variety of locations. Girls sing, a skateboard clatters, a pub hubbub



Hitachi's excellent new Transpost in action, looking like something out of a '70s vision of entertainment in 2004





Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope. Help me, Obi-Wan Kenobi. You're my only hope



Officially the least-threatening Space Invader ever. Fairly useful when it comes to soaking up beer froth, though



If you press a special button every 14 seconds you can unlock a bonus time-telling mode. Actually, no, you can't



Finally, Space Invaders once more brought together with objects from their natural home, the good old pub



Nick Clark grabs this surround-sound setup for simply throwing together a few tunes. How fittingly criminal



06 Now, where's our flying car?

Japan: Hitachi's new holographic display, Transpost, doesn't require 3D glasses, can be viewed from any angle, and can display captured data in realtime. Images, in 2D but taken from 24 different camera positions, are projected on to a special rotating screen and… oh, enough technicalities. It's the potential here that has us salivating over the future again, because according to the ever-reliable Ananova, Transpost is being developed for use in shop displays and games.

Hold on, don't we remember being shocked and appalled by Sega's holographic (and Rick Dyer-authored) *Time Traveller*, which used a parabolic mirror to achieve a similar effect 13 years ago? We can only hope the future of three-dimensional electronic entertainment is significantly better than its past, or we're going right back to throwing rocks at dinosaurs.

07 Space Invaders

Japan: If there's one thing that turns up in Out There almost as often as *Tempest*, it's *Space Invaders*. Perhaps that's because it's the game's 25th anniversary, or perhaps it's because the shaggy haired buffoons inserting coins into cabinets two-and-a-half decades ago just weren't good enough at twitching left and right to fight them off. That explains why the invasion has been such a success, at least in marketing terms, and that's why you can get the 46-pixel icon on everything these days. Look at our lurid pink alarm clock, for example, or the beer mat, or the matches.

Our favourite piece of Invader tat, however, has to be the darts – complete with silver monster flights for the budding Bristows and Fordhams among you.

08 G'N'R in Vice City win

UK: Back in **E**132, we challenged you to compile your ultimate *Vice City* soundtrack to win a Dolby surround sound gaming kit. Those wallowing most effectively in cheesy nostalgia included Darren Mitchell, who rolled up his jacket sleeves to exhume the likes of It Bites and Huey Lewis. We also loved Gavin Richardson's segue of U2 into NWA into Pigbag. But the winner was Nick Clark, who kicked off his mix with The Smiths' How Soon Is Now and took in Blondie, Eric B & Rakim and Voodoo Ray before playing out with Guns 'N' Roses' 'Sweet Child Of Mine'.

Continue

Flash Games
Grow, *Crimson Room*, *A Break In The Road* – all neat and very now
MuckyBaby
Out of the ashes of Muckyfoot comes a *Skooldaze* clone
Go
Fact: an average Go player can beat the best computer player

Quit

Independent Devco Shrinkages
Ten worldwide within three years? A terrifying thought
This year's AOU show
And still we wait for arcade gaming's turnaround
Sonic the Hedgehog
Once-proud gaming icon now slowing down a little

09 Market Forces

Is fact stranger than fiction? Richard Morgan thinks there's plenty of overlap. And what with the shenanigans of US corporations such as Halliburton in Iraq, he has a point in Market Forces, a vision of the near future where western conglomerates fight it out to set up financial backing for rebel groups in mineral-rich areas.

Born on the wrong side of the London slum boundary, Chris Faulkner has worked his way out of the Zones, becoming the hottest operator at Hammett McColl. Now four years without a road kill, he's joined Shorn Associates – the smoothest, meanest outfit in the field of conflict investment. The stakes, the cash, the hardware, his profile and the quality of the whisky he drinks have all been raised. Psychotic serial adulterer Mike Bryant becomes his new best mate. And despite being happily married, Chris is getting all the right looks from TV babe Liz Linshaw. What could possibly go wrong?

Perhaps the same could be said of English teacher turned Hollywood-bound sci-fi noir writer Morgan himself. His first two far-future sci-fi Takeshi Kovacs novels have been hugely successful, presumably to the point of being life-changing. Maybe that's why his focus in Market Forces turns to the individual. There's less of the previous unbounded fantasy and more exploration of the enclosures that restrict, as well as the doors and temptations opened by success. In creating a mirror for the corporate world in Market Forces, maybe Morgan himself finds a reflective surface in the character of Chris Faulkner.

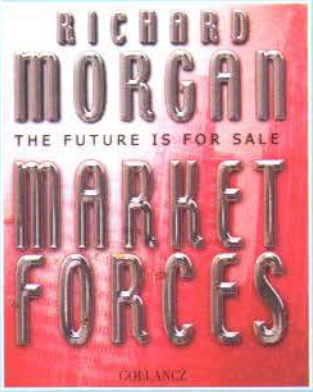
10 The Making of Dredd vs Death

One advantage of having your own publishing company is the ability to put out a book such as The Making of Dredd vs Death.

A coffee table tome revealing the processes behind Rebellion's 2003 game, it starts with the developer's decision to buy '2000AD', and a potted history of Judge Dredd, before going on to present a cross-section of how a computer game is created. Lead coder Kevin Floyer-Lea gives a good explanation of the features of the Asura engine, while lead artist Tim Jones talks about character design as well as the more detailed processes of animation and texturing.

The most interesting thread running through the book is what didn't make it into the game, however. Dredd fans won't need reminding of the non-appearance of the Lawmaster motorbike – an initial design decision – but there were plenty of other smaller features that were cut during development. Mean Machine, the baddie of the Stallone film, was an early casualty, while more complex design considerations limited the number of on-screen NPCs as well as seeing off plot-enhancing vid-screens. The basic problem seems to be the wealth of possibilities offered by Mega-City One, most of which are incompatible with the restrictions of making a videogame. With two movies in the offing, it's likely Rebellion will get the chance to expand on its obvious enthusiasm for all things Dredd. And more excitingly for some older '2000AD' readers, the book also looks to the future, featuring screens from a prototype Rogue Trooper game.

09



Author: Richard Morgan
Publisher: Gollancz
ISBN: 0 575 07512 0

10



Authors: Jamie Boardman & David Walsh
Publisher: 2000AD/Rebellion
ISBN: 1 904265 24 3

11



Site: **Xbox Live gamertag pictures**
URL: **www.gamertagpics.com/**

11 Website of the month

The internet can be a faceless place sometimes, and Xbox Live is much the same. Ever wondered who the man behind CrazyFace69 really is? Want to fancy User123, but can't bring yourself to crush without a face to lock on to? GamertagPics does exactly as its URL suggests – it allows Xbox Live users to attach a picture to their Gamertag, and curious web browsers to peer in wonderment at the previously faceless entities. There are game reviews and forums, too, as well as spot features like the 'Get to know a gamer' regular. "Check out the beautiful women of Xbox Live!" screams one link on the front page, proudly.

Hey! What about the beautiful men of Xbox Live? Oh. Yeah, good point.

12 Advertainment

US: When you've got a game as hard to explain as *Viewtiful Joe*, it's best to let the pictures do the talking. At a time when there's a lot of 'Not Actual Footage' trickery being thrown around in game adverts, it's good to see Capcom keeping it simple for its American campaign.



Captain Blue's perfect enunciation would make Professor Higgins proud. "Vee-ooo-tee-fool-djoh!"



Now that you're introduced to the strange name, Joe lets loose in his well-filled scarlet lycra. Viewtiful



Welcome to Joe's world. All Andrex green and lip-stick red, it's the ugliest beautiful place in the world



The brief footage of Joe's special moves do more to communicate his skills than pages of clumsy prose



In the 20-second world of adverts, even Joe's suh-loooow flashes by in the blink of an astounded eye



The whirlwind tour of Joe's world climaxes with a glimpse of the boss. Don't worry. He can't hurt you



Anyone left unsure is finally shown Joe's demolition of the Capcom logo. Voice: "Henshin-a-gogo, baby!"



REDEYE

A sideways look at the videogame industry

End of the zoners

"The zone in my opinion is a fallacy. It's a state I've never been at. When people ask me to describe when you're at that ultimate level in a competitive nature on one of the records I've set, the best way to describe it isn't the zone. The best way for me to describe it is painful." – Billy Mitchell, '1-UP' #3, 2003

RedEye is at a concert. He won't tell you who's playing, because there's no answer that won't prejudice someone against what he's going to say, and this is a theory column not a story. If you need a visual reference, imagine it is Air or Aereogramme, Britney or Bright Eyes, Cibo Matto or the Cheeky Girls. It's not important. What's important is that RedEye is enthralled, hypnotised by the music's urban squall. It ebbs and flows like the crowd in front, peaking for a moment then dropping away in disinterest, and then – bang – it's back again. Funny thing is, on the album it doesn't sound anything like this special. It's all in the moment, though, and right now, right here, RedEye's eyes defocused, mouth slightly lolling, the delivery is perfect.

The set draws to a close, and, coming down, RedEye's thoughts turn to Nagoshi-san. Contrary to what you might think, RedEye's favourite Nagoshi column isn't the one where he writes about how much he likes to drink. It isn't the other one where he writes about how much he likes to drink, either. Or the third one where... Anyway, it's the one where he writes about level design in *F-Zero GX*, and compares creating courses to writing a piece of music. He talks about one track in the context of a rock solo, squealing and twisting, threatening to spiral out of control, then folding up and out for a burst of coherence on a straight-line highway.

Pace is everything in videogames. It is a quality not often written about by reviewers, evidently almost as rarely considered by designers, but it can be the difference between a game that causes players to thrill and one that causes players to tire. Pace, just as in music and film and literature, keeps the consumer on their toes. It plays with their feelings like a cat with a mouse – slow, slow, quick quick slow, pounce and rip and tear. Pace in videogames can have another side effect: it can cause players to hit the zone, the (for some, at least) mythical state that is the closest videogames have to drug-induced blissed-out hypnosis.

When you are playing a reaction-based videogame the mental process goes something like this: your eyes see the action, your brain interprets the situation on screen, makes a decision to move or fire and sends a signal to your hands. If successful, the screen declares as much, that achievement increases your confidence, and endorphins (plus audiovisual feedback) make you happier. Eventually, you attain a state where the mental chain is minimised – your eyes still see the action, but the path to your hands is down to a picosecond, near automatic, and endorphins rack up like a combo multiplier in *Ikaruga*.

So why has Mitchell, a true gaming legend and idol to the three-letter hi-score crowd, never experienced the zone? It could be because his genetic build renders him physically incapable of getting there, or maybe that what he recognises as pain *is* the zone. It could even be that the zone really doesn't exist, being an 'Emperor's New Clothes' bit of fiction written by gamers too afraid to admit they've never experienced it. RedEye thinks it's more likely down to the sort of games Mitchell plays. He is, after all, the world record holder for *Pac-Man*.

Pac-Man isn't a zone game, because the best players never have to react. Each level has a perfect solution, a web of directions that criss-cross through the maze and provide absolute success each time you play. Thus, achieving that perfect game isn't really a test of reaction, but of memory. Being able to get that world record – achieving that 255-level, all-ghosts, all-fruit zenith – is something like being one of those people who can recall the exact sequence of 20 packs of shuffled cards. It's incredibly impressive, but ultimately pretty dull and you're not going to hit the zone doing it. The closest you get to hypnosis is falling asleep.

Pace in gaming is like pace in music – not just about speed but rather more to do with acceleration. Atari Teenage Riot can sound as pedestrian as Michelle McManus when they don't vary the delivery of their white noise. The breakdowns in Daft Punk's 'Discovery' are as critical as the tunnel levels in *Tempest 2K* – periods of concentrated calm, delivered with sci-fi precision and putting the lifted, fast-paced thrills into super-normal context. It is not as simple as forming an elegant curve to higher consciousness – they vary their pace and rhythm, delivering the unexpected while ratcheting up the pressure. *Pac-Man*'s pace is monotonous – relentless but grinding, predictable. Intelligent application of pace is the difference between *Agent Under Fire* and *GoldenEye*, between *Gradius* and *Generic Scrolling Shooter X*. The difference between tonight and the mundane.

Walking away from the concert, down a road wet with slush and flyers and empty, twisted cans of Ace lager, accelerating past groups of hyperactive concert-kids and dropping back for the speeding traffic that kicks up the slush, RedEye considers what it all means. Nothing, really, in a way: like music, there is no ultimate formula for the perfect game, no scientific pattern towards producing brilliance. There are only lessons that tell us things we might want to include or avoid – and even they can be disobeyed with enough skill, just as there can be amazing pop songs without middle eights, thrilling discordant noise without silence. Creators who want to put players into the zone need to be aware that, like any other medium, games aren't just about content. They're about delivery.

"Why has Pac-Man champion Mitchell, a true gaming legend and idol to the three-letter hi-score crowd, never experienced the zone?"

RedEye is a veteran videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s*



TRIGGER HAPPY

Steven Poole

Going critical in Rotterdam

Rotterdam, city of industrial shipping and banging trance music, is also the venue for the Rotterdam Film Festival, which is inviting videogames into the fold.

Not just any videogames. Commercial products – no matter how beautiful, like *Ico* – are not welcome. Instead, a groovily smoky club space called Off_Corso, shabbily wired up with old monitors and keyboards like the Nebuchadnezzar, has been taken over by an exhibition of 'critical games'. Much of the time, this involves people (some call themselves artists) taking game products or engines and twisting them to generate political or aesthetic propaganda.

I liked the cheeky concept of Velvet-Strike, for example, an example of what you might call aesthetic counter-terrorism. In response to the preponderance of Osama Bin Laden skins on jingoistic US gaming servers after the announcement of Bush's 'war on terrorism', Anne Marie Schleiner developed provocatively pacifist graphical 'spray paint' which can be used as graffiti on *Counter-Strike* servers. The video shown is a compilation of such stealthy spraying in the midst of the macho violence: gunman silhouettes form a big heart; a teddy bear holds a rifle; two soldiers embrace in various homoerotic poses. Sprays with slogans include 'Hostages of military fantasy,' 'We are all Iraqis now' or, with true geek wit: 'bind mouse1 "+dropweapon".'

Velvet-Strike is not a game but an attitude. The idea of invading online spaces that exist for no other reason than to gratify militaristic fantasies, and then gently defacing them with anti-war slogans, is not just funny (though funny it is), but also a demonstration of how online gameworlds, even those of apparently simple shooters, are sophisticated enough to be arenas of political debate or sites of symbolic activism.

Similar, but less subtle, is a game seen before in **Edge** called *Waco Resurrection*, a thirdperson shooter, built using the open-source Torque engine, that lets you take the role of a repeatedly resurrected David Koresh attempting to gun down the waves of FBI grunts swarming over your headquarters. Power-ups come in the form of glowing bibles that drop from the sky, and they can be used as spells by speaking into a microphone in a rubber Koresh mask. (Possibly for reasons of embarrassment or hygiene, no one at the exhibition was actually wearing their mask.)

The rather heavy-handed satire at work here, I suppose, is meant to compensate for the shortcomings of the game itself, as it isn't very good. Does that affect *Waco Resurrection*'s status as a work of independent game art? "The game commemorates the tenth anniversary of the siege at a unique cultural moment in which holy war has become embedded in official government policy," the makers tell us. "The spirit of Koresh has become a paradoxical embodiment of the current political landscape – he is both the besieged religious other and the logical extension of the neo-conservative millennial vision." Well, okay, but conceptual didacticism seems to have elbowed out the idea of enjoyment. That paradigm is taken to its extreme in the Election Manifesto Random Policy Generator, running on an iMac upstairs. "We pledge to disband unpopular independence." "Identify private decision-making." "Endorse productivity? Invest in productivity!" Slogans appear in red capitals on a black background, there is nothing to interact with. "Political rhetoric is not about communicating information, but is for communicating the impression that information has been exchanged," says the blurb. Which is true – and, as with a lot of conceptual art, it is all you need to know. The actual object adds nothing.

The most minimalist work is also one of the prettiest. For Super Mario Clouds, Cory Arcangel took a *Super Mario Bros* cartridge, reprogramming and soldering in a flash ROM to remove everything except the blue sky and fluffy clouds, which scroll by ethereally on the wall. What does it mean? What is it saying? Perhaps it's refreshing, not trying to force any meaning down our throats beyond an implicit argument about the need for technical competence in order to be creative in this arena.

To me, though, the most boisterously entertaining example of 'critical games' was the first thing I saw on entering the exhibition: a large projection of gib-soaked ultraviolence in the shape of an everlasting *Quake III* deathmatch. A cheesy American announcer spews a loop of soundbite phrases – "Police conspiracy / hostage siege / desperation despair / ethnic war" – over an irresistible grungy guitar riff. Meanwhile, the notifications of frags reveal that each character in the rocketfest has been christened with mischievous intent: "Dick Cheney almost dodged Ralph Nader's rocket," "Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah was gunned down by Condoleezza Rice". It's called Diplomatic Arena and is by Belgian/Canadian collective Workspace Unlimited, which is also building a large-scale networked virtual gallery space called Virtual World of Art, within which works like Diplomatic Arena can be explored.

I left the exhibition wondering about the relationship of 'critical games' to mainstream videogame development. The satire of something like Diplomatic Arena or *Waco Resurrection* may be crude compared with other media (for example the superb Get Your War On online comic strip). And yet, compared with the explicit political or social content you might find in most videogames, this is shockingly powerful and as sophisticated as the most fine-grained Chomskyan analysis.

Compared with the explicit political or social content you might find in most videogames, this is shockingly powerful and sophisticated

Sure, a lot of the time we want pure fantasy from our games, but a more sophisticated means of dealing with the real world might also be interesting. As exhibition curator Edward Carels points out: "Time and again we are struck by how [games] shy away from the real world."

It should be recognised that these 'critical games' do not offer as rich or interesting a playing experience as the product they arrogantly affect to despise. However, they do make a powerful argument for commercial designers entering into a closer engagement with contemporary reality.

Steven Poole is the author of 'Trigger Happy: The Inner Life of Videogames' (Fourth Estate). Email: steven_poole@mac.com

TOKYO GAME LIFE

Christophe Kagotani, Edge's man in Japan

Bidding a fond farewell to a legend

Hi! My name is Christophe Kagotani. Some of you may already know me. I've been working in Japan for **Edge** for quite a while now, but this is my very first time writing a column. As a French-Japanese person, English isn't my first language, but I'll do my best. And I promise that I'll try to stay on the topic of videogames. Anyway, as we say in Japan, "Yoroshiku onegaishimasu."

At this year's AOU show [see p12], something we already knew about was finally made official. Yes, SNK's Neo-Geo hardware is finally being retired. After 13 years of hard work, the most venerable of consoles is being put out to pasture, and I think the occasion is a sad one.

This may sound a bit backward-looking or nostalgic, but it's hard for me to get my head around the fact that the very special, very charismatic sprites of SNK's machine are going to disappear in favour of more modern, more contemporary graphics.

This machine, after all, was the very first hardware to be produced as an arcade board/home console hybrid, in the shape of the famous MVS board and its consumer counterpart, the Neo-Geo. So, when the Neo-Geo brand is retired, not one but two pieces of hardware will disappear.

Also, the MVS Neo-Geo system was the very first piece of hardware to create a bridge between the arcade and the consumer by using a memory card, so that's another great memory attached to both pieces of hardware.

It's hard to overestimate how much of an impact this system had in this country. To appreciate it, you'd really need to have been living in Japan at the time.

You see, SNK was one of the very first companies (yes, another first) to initiate cabinet rental. You could find the small MVS cabinets on the street in front of restaurants or toy shops, inside train stations, nearly everywhere. And this principle was applied to the home console, too: Neo-Geos were available in many video rental shops across the country. For a small fee (I don't remember the exact amount right now – this was over ten years ago, after all), you could rent the Neo-Geo, two controllers and a game. It was a very big deal because very few people could actually afford to buy such a powerful console. And it's still a very expensive format nowadays, of course. But when you buy a Neo-Geo cartridge, you don't just buy a game, you buy a piece of history, a piece of pure, *genuine* arcade entertainment.

I recently went to see *Samurai Spirit Zero Special* at the Club Sega situated in Akihabara. There I saw the hardcore players, the people who'd queued all night, sleeping in front of the arcade in order to be the very first to touch the new game and see how it differed from previous instalments in the beat 'em up series. These people would queue up all over again to spend another day playing the game, discovering its new foibles and refining their judgments of it. It's hardly surprising that this particular group is also dismayed by the changes in SNK's fortunes. But is it being conservative or reactionary to feel these emotions? Perhaps, but the question remains: what happens to a hardware maker when it has to turn its focus to software only?

It makes me think of Sega, of course. The company was never more creative than when it had its own hardware to support: even if its games weren't million sellers, they were a demonstration of a powerful sense of creativity. Once the Dreamcast was over, Sega had to face a new reality. Of course, this gave the company a new direction and a wider market, and in that sense I'm excited to see what it is going to do with these new possibilities. But at the same time I have the feeling that Sega will never be the same again.

What do you think? Will SNK still be SNK on PS2, Xbox or Atomiswave?

Now, I know SNK Playmore is not the same thing as SNK, but it has kept the flame very much alive, using many of the company's former development teams. But now that we're losing the Neo-Geo, the Japanese game horizon has changed again. The last link with the golden age of 16bit has been severed. So what do we have left? Sony, Microsoft and Nintendo. Of course, this makes Nintendo the very last console company left in the market with a pure videogame and toy-based background. And while I know that Nintendo is a very cash-rich company, I can't help thinking: what if Nintendo is next? What if Nintendo is pushed into becoming a software-only company? Could it survive and continue to be creative and push at the boundaries of how we experience gaming? Admittedly, the Neo-Geo was never a major consumer platform, but people have considered what happened to Sega and said that a similar thing could happen to Nintendo.

I really can't see it happening, but some argue that this would be natural selection, the way the market forces gaming to evolve, and there's truth in that, of course. It explains why the arcades in Japan have been turning into graveyards, where people are still enjoying old hits but discovering few new stars.

So what does it matter if the arcades are a dying market? What does it mean for the Japanese industry as a whole? Well, arcades have been, from the very beginning, the backbone of our perception of Japanese videogames. And for some time now Japanese-made games have been making a reduced impact on the international market, which is more and more dominated by the west. Is the Neo-Geo another stone pulled out of the wall, adding to the pace of Japanese decline?

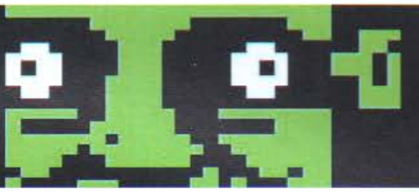
"When you buy a Neo-Geo cartridge, you don't just buy a game, you buy a piece of history, a piece of pure, genuine arcade entertainment"

Well, I hope not, even if nowadays I'm finding it more and more difficult to define the strengths of Japanese-produced titles.

Never mind. Enough of these dark thoughts. I'm off to plug my *Metal Slug 5* cartridge into my Neo-Geo and get ready to rock and roll.

Let's celebrate one hell of a console.

Toshihiro Nagoshi is away (possibly holed up in a bar somewhere, smashed on expensive booze)



BIFFOVISION

Page 28, press hold, and reveal. 'Digitiser's founder speaks out

There's far enough, and then there's too far

As game fans, it goes without saying that the majority of us are also fans of the 'Star Wars' movies. We all have our favourite moments, be it Vader telling Luke that he's really his daddy, or that time when Princess Leia called Chewbacca a 'stupid fat muff'...

You know what I really like? That bit in 'The Empire Strikes Back' where Darth Vader suddenly jumps to his death, for no apparent reason. Man, I never saw that coming! And there's that hilarious moment of slapstick in 'A New Hope', or whatever it's called these days, where Luke can't get through a door because Princess Leia and Hans Solero are in his way. He just keeps running on the spot, and Hans and Leia are walking on the spot, then Hans turns 90 degrees, and starts walking up against a wall – for the rest of the film! Classic stuff!

Though generally considered to be the work of a great auteur-turned-swollen-capitalist-dog, even the 'Star Wars' prequels have their great scenes. Let's not forget the exchange between Yoda and Count Fooku during 'Attack Of The Clones':

Yoda: The Force flows through me!

Fooku: Where are you going, Jedi?

Yoda: The Force flows through me!

Fooku: You cannot resist the power of the Dark Side. Where are you going, Jedi? Where are you going, Jedi?

Yoda: The Force flows through me!

At which point Yoda runs headfirst into a large lake of lava, and dies. The crazy little troll!

Friends, I'm just joshing. You can stop scratching your brains. Of course none of those things really happened in the 'Star Wars' films, all of which contained clever dialogue, intricate plotting and spectacular action sequences (well, a few of them, anyway). Had these things happened in the films, you'd likely wonder whether George Lucas had succumbed to brain-scrambling money poisoning, or you were watching an unexpected sci-fi spin-off of Monty Python: "He's not a Sith Lord, he's a very naughty boy! This Jedi has ceased to be, it is an ex Obi-Wan!" etc.

If this prospect gets you excited, and you would be keen to see such absurdity occurring within the 'Star Wars' universe, you could do worse than pick up a copy of *Jedi Academy*, the latest firstperson travesty to be given Mr Lucas's beard of approval (as an aside, have you noticed Lucas no longer has a discernable jaw-line? My theory is that there's a neck there somewhere, but it's obscured by a foot of wiry, grey hair. Perhaps he hides cakes in it, or action figure royalties).

Apologies if I'm slightly behind the times on this – I appreciate that *Jedi Academy* is by no means a new title. The PC version of the game has been on sale for some months, and yet LucasArts has neglected to use the opportunity to fix fundamental flaws with the AI. Oh, sure, there's probably some patch online that stops your enemies committing suicide, but the average *Jedi Academy* owner – more likely to be a 'Star Wars' fan than a hardcore gamer – is unlikely to be aware of it. If Lucas can release special editions of his films, which, ahem, fix fundamental flaws in the original product, then why not special editions of the games which also bear his name? You know – editions which are complete, rather than hastily assembled piss-takes. Probably because us lot would all whinge that, "Ohhh, they should've taken longer and not released something in such an unfinished state." Ungrateful sods that we are.

You know what I really like? That bit in 'The Empire Strikes Back' where Darth Vader suddenly jumps to his death, for no apparent reason

The release of bug-free editions aside, it raises an issue about whether there is a market for special editions, or director's cuts, of games. Admittedly, a few hardy souls have tried it – Capcom with its GameCube remake of *Resident Evil* for one. Thing is, where do you draw the line?

With the original 'Star Wars' trilogy due for release on DVD in September, hardcore fanboys are up in arms that Lucas won't be including the original versions of his films. Instead, the set will feature the 1997 special editions with their much-maligned enhancements. There's a reworking of the Cantina scene so Greedo fires first, an extended sequence where Luke Skywalker takes a slash up against a droid, and the inexplicable digital removal of Carrie Fisher's limbs, so she resembles a sort of floating torso thing. Lucas's defence was that the original films were merely works-in-progress, and the special editions are how he'd have made them if he'd had the time, money and technology. Well, fair enough. GameCube *Resident Evil* is, presumably, the version Capcom would have preferred to have released on the PlayStation, way back when (although I must admit I missed all that chat about 'The Master of Unlocking').

Arguably, *Sonic Heroes* is a special edition of sorts. It pretty much reprises the locations from the original *Sonic The Hedgehog*, albeit with a 3D twist. And lord knows how many 'special editions' we've had of *Space Invaders*, or *Pac-Man*, or *Tetris*. Thing is, in all the above examples those responsible have come at the special editions from the same point of view as Herr Lucas – that more is more. Compare the critical reaction to the special editions of 'Star Wars' to, say, Ridley Scott's director's cuts of 'Blade Runner' or 'Alien'. Both films included additional footage, and yet were shorter than the original releases. Will *Space Invaders: Invasion Day* be as massive as the original? No. Were *Wordtris* and *Bombtris* and *Arsetris* bigger hits than *Tetris*? No, because all deviated too far from a winning formula.

Personally, I'd kill to play *Sonic The Hedghog* with a subtle 3D twist. I don't want to be tethered to his chums, I want to play a Sonic game that feels like Sonic and returns to the fundamentals of the series. Developers need to stop trying to show off, stop trying to reinvent the wheel, and give us what we expect when we fork out for a familiar brand. Look what happened when Coca-Cola changed its recipe. Let's see some more faithful franchise extensions. Let's see some special editions that don't wipe the slate clean and start again. And let's not have any more of Mario in a bloody aqua jetpack. I want to see the little Italian twat jumping on turtles' backs, and quaffing hallucinogenic fungi. Okay?

Mr Biffo is a semi-retired videogame journalist. His views do not necessarily coincide with ***Edge****'s*

prescreen

Incoming electronic entertainment from across the globe

Edge's most wanted

Singstar

We look forward to curling an Elvis lip to 'Suspicious Minds' and attempting to nail the falsetto on 'I Believe In A Thing Called Love.' First single's out soon, too.



(PS2) Sony

STALKER: Shadow of Chernobyl

If this bleak Chernobyl-themed military adventure turns out to be as uncomfortably 'real' as it sounds then it will be a unique, if harrowing, experience.



(PC) THQ

Killzone

Formidable FPS that will be a revelation to anyone who's only ever played *Medal Of Honor: Frontline*. Now we need to see its multiplayer chops.



(PS2) Sony

Katamari Damashi

The box art alone is enough to bring tears to your eyes. And the premise? It's the mechanics of *Monkey Ball* with the tidying up delight of *Tetris*. Irresistible.



PS2 (Namco)

The sun never sets

Why Britannia rules the track

It's been an unsettling year for British game development, but there's one arena in which the news is unremittingly positive. Stop and think about it, and you suddenly realise that Britain has everything with wheels and an engine licked. From plain-sounding addresses in Liverpool, Brighton, Warwickshire, Newcastle and Guildford games are launched that cover every inch of the driving game map: *Project Gotham*, *MotoGP: Unreal Racing Technology*, *Colin McRae Rally*, *Driver* and *Burnout*.

The rest of the world struggles by comparison. *Need For Speed Underground* is an appealing package, but fails to match the satisfying mastery of *Project Gotham 2* or the narcotic highs of *Burnout*. And, as each month passes, the anticipation for *Gran Turismo 4* becomes harder to maintain. Its clinical, schoolmistress attitude to driving is starting to look dated now that British games have shown that it's possible to produce showroom looks and accurate handling without sacrificing freewheeling exhilaration.

Driver 3 (p48), with its Film Director mode and immaculate modelling, caters for the pornographer that lurks inside every petrolhead. *PGR2*'s sliding back ends do a better job of explaining how four-inch-wide strips of rubber can propel half a ton of metal than any physics lesson. *Colin McCrae Rally 04* may sacrifice accurate simulation, but recreates the wild and desperate improvisation that fuels the sport's attraction. *MotoGP: URT*, by taking the trouble to think mechanically, created a control system which allowed a home console to do justice to the motorbike for the first time. And although *Burnout 3* (p32) tightens its predecessor's boost chaining system, it should still trigger the kind of unblinking ecstasy usually only accessible to shoot 'em up specialists.

You can pose through city streets, shave patient tenths off a platinum challenge, scream to victory on one wheel, slice down the wrong side of the Tarmac and hold your breath until the wheels bite into the dirt. Whatever your driving fantasy, if you can't do it in a car that's British made, at least you can do it in a car that's British rendered.













Burnout 3

A new publisher coincides with change of direction for Criterion's successful series – and a UK development team unquestionably at the top of its game





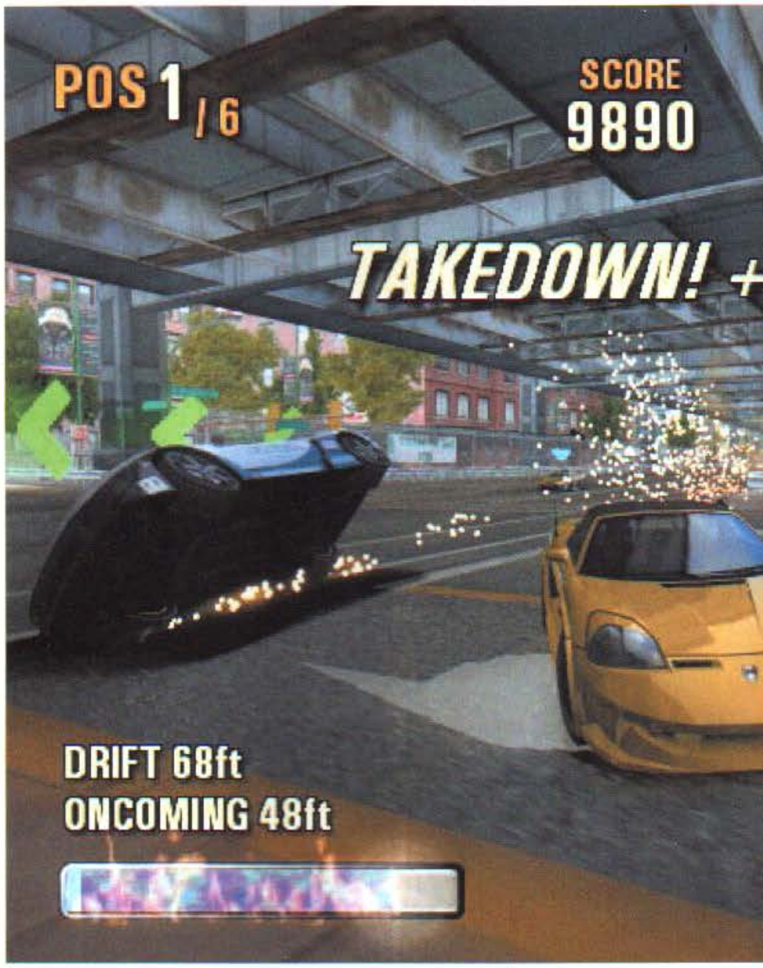
The audio has yet to be finalised but already signs are promising that it will keep up with the visuals. During crashes (and particularly in slo-mo mode – see 'Crash 'n' burn') the detail of distortion from the force of impact is impressive and adds immensely to the game's atmosphere

The preview build of *Burnout 3* we're being shown isn't hugely impressive. It is, in effect, *Burnout 2.5* – a slightly enhanced version of admittedly one of the finest racing games of recent times but which shows little in the way of the significant leap the game enjoyed from its first to second iteration.

This particular version, however, is a month old. We're travelled to Criterion's Surrey headquarters to play the very latest code – the first magazine in the world to do so – and the developer has deliberately misled us. It's an effective manner in which to highlight the advancements made because once the second, newer disc is loaded into the debug unit and a race selected, there is no doubt that the journey to Guildford has been worth it.

The current *Burnout 3* is in fact a considerable evolution from its immediate predecessor and judging from the 'before and after' demonstration we've just witnessed the work the team has achieved in the last four weeks is remarkable – there isn't a better-looking racing game on Xbox. Which is high praise considering the version we're currently playing is running on a PS2.

"The idea is to win having capitalised on every opportunity to nudge your opponents into oncoming traffic or stationary obstacles"



As you'd expect, the Xbox version is at least as accomplished as the PS2 equivalent. The difference between the two is less apparent than you might expect – a credit to Criterion's coding skills. The role of traffic during accidents has also been improved, as lorries spill their payload across the road



Boost can now be used as soon as it's accumulated, and while you gain some for driving on the wrong side of the road, near misses and air time, it's less generous than in *Burnout 2*. In this sequel, only aggressive driving will reap the highest rewards

The premise has altered, and now focuses on battling against like-minded drivers on civilian roads. You still race, of course (this time against five, rather than just three adversaries), but the idea is to win having capitalised on every opportunity to nudge your opponents into oncoming traffic, stationary obstacles or simply, and perhaps most satisfyingly, slamming them against roadside boundaries. These result in a 'take down,' extending your boost bar (the same section can subsequently be 'stolen' by the opposition) and serving up a healthy dose of points. Needless to say, your adversaries are no pushover and will fight back just as vigorously – you may have managed to guide the first-placed driver into a car park full of coaches (each of the tracks has signature take down spots) but the game's generous catch-up feature ensures that before long they may be on your tail looking to return the favour. And that's the point: *Burnout 3* is the automotive equivalent of natural selection, a turbo-assisted, unrelenting illustration of Darwin's survival of the fittest principle and as such, some of the most fun you can have with a joypad in your hands. (Owners of a Network Adaptor not content with proving their evolutionary superiority against the CPU will be pleased to learn the game is fully playable online, with Criterion currently working to ensure that sixplayer battles are technically indistinguishable from the offline game.)

Despite the change in the core experience, the third *Burnout* inevitably shares some of its predecessors' characteristics. Lap-based racing still mixes with point-to-point and face-off challenges, and marathon rounds fuse tracks from different settings (themed around Europe, the US and the far east). Predictably, though, things have progressed. Visually, the environments are some of the busiest and most vibrant this side of *NFS Underground*, though certainly more accomplished in terms of real-world quality. The car models benefit from greater detail and better environment mapping, and crashes have been spectacularly enhanced (see 'Crash 'n' burn'). But the structural developments are of particular interest. The main mode now offers a clever branching progression with a variety of play styles (in addition to those mentioned above, we spotted Eliminator, Hot Lap, Survivor, Battle – Last Car Standing, and Road Rage – a slight reworking of *Burnout 2*'s Pursuit mode). And, of course, Crash mode returns also in enhanced form and with the intriguing

Format: PlayStation2, Xbox
Publisher: Electronic Arts
Developer: Criterion Games
Origin: UK
Release: September













The racing influence is evident in the (faster) car selection – even the most basic vehicle is a tuned hothatch. Far closer to their real-life inspirations, they include exponents of the rally, touring and sportscar world. And wait until you see the bonus models...

promise of competitive and co-op twoplayer options (as well as online compatibility on PS2, of course). As for other modes, Criterion is keeping quiet.

With release currently set for September, the team has ample time in which to balance and fine tune its project, though it's obviously proud of what it has achieved so far. Part of the buoyancy clearly detectable as we walk around the *Burnout* office is the result of the series' new publisher. The role EA has played in terms of getting Criterion to focus on and push certain aspects of the game is openly recognised. It's an association that has resulted in what looks set to become the pinnacle of the series – structure and presentation in particular are already great benefactors. The team's belief in its creation is patently evident and, from what we've seen, seems entirely justified. On current form, and with the backing of the industry's largest publisher, Criterion Games looks destined to secure its place alongside the world's finest arcade racing game developers.



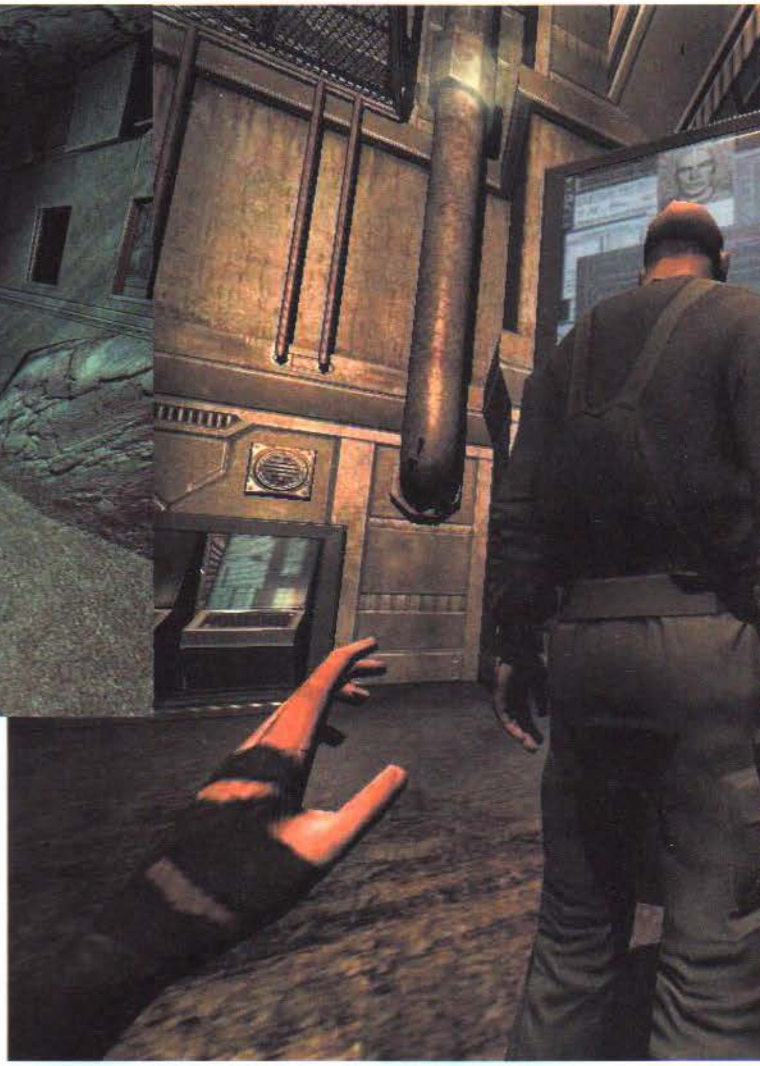
Crash 'n' burn

Already unrivalled when it comes to creating videogaming's most exciting car crashes, *Burnout 2*'s sequel has a revised physics model allowing vehicles' front and rears to crumple in on themselves, and work is underway to ensure the chassis twists in realistic fashion. Add to this a substantial increase in the number of particle effects and the resulting shower of plastic, metal, glass and sparks is dazzling, particularly now that you can also slow down the action (by pressing the boost button). The developer is promising an 'aftertouch' effect so that the car can be directed towards other vehicles for maximum carnage, while explosions and fire effects (and air rams in Crash mode) are currently being investigated.

The Chronicles Of Riddick

A prequel to the prequel to 'Pitch Black' may not sound like the tastiest recipe ever, but it certainly has the looks





In the build we played, the enemies were hardly smart opponents – simply running away from them and up a ladder returned them to their previously passive state. Hopefully this will be addressed



Once you've knocked out an enemy, you can drag and hide the body. Predictable enough, but the ragdolling is excellent

The Chronicles of Riddick is running on one of **Edge**'s overworked Xboxes in its equally well-worn games room and a curious passer-by sticks his head around the corner. First reaction? "Is that *Doom 3* you're playing?"

It's an easy mistake to make from only the briefest of glimpses, and it happens because both games use per-pixel shading and dynamic lighting to create some weirdly atmospheric otherworldly scenes. But they also share other visual themes, too, namely industrial-styled interiors decked out with metallic surfaces, grilles, ducts and vents.

"A trading system exists within the prison's walls, enabling you to barter cigarettes, harder drugs and other items for privileges"

Unlike *Doom 3*, in which you once more fill the boots of a hard-boiled space marine, however, *Riddick* sees you assuming the role of Vin Diesel's character from the sci-fi movie 'Pitch Black'. The game is supposed to be a prequel to the upcoming movie that shares the Riddick name, which is itself a prequel to the 2000 celluloid outing which originally got Diesel noticed. You're following this, right?

You have been incarcerated in Butcher Bay, the most secure prison facility known to man – although it's a reputation you'll be looking to destroy by busting out of it.

Played out in firstperson, Riddick has shades of Namco's *Breakdown* (see p104) about it, especially since its developer is attempting to incorporate a hand-to-hand combat system that amounts to something more than wild flailings of your fists.

But there are weapons, too – although they'll need to be stolen from guards first. And then it's not easy, because each firearm has been DNA encoded to security staff – if it doesn't recognise the user, it simply won't work. Cue one trip to the facility's computer system in order to hack in your own data.

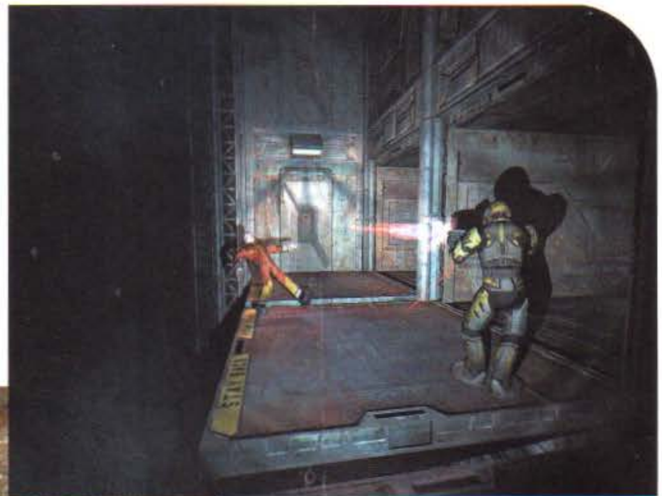
If it's beginning to sound like something a little more cerebral than your average firstperson shooter, that's because it is. Encountering other characters, for example, i not simply a matter of ignoring them or blowing them away: a trading system exists within the prison's walls, enabling you to barter cigarettes, harder drugs and other items in order to gain tangible privileges that will assist you in your overall plan.

And there's a considerable amount of stealth-based gameplay, too. Riddick's 'shined' eyes allow him to see in the dark, so

Format: **Xbox**
Publisher: **Vivendi Universal**
Developer: **Starbreeze Studios**
Origin: **Sweden**
Release: **TBC**











The dynamic shadows add a great deal to the visual fidelity (left) – and they're applied to every character that appears, even you, when you're trying to hide

a logical course of action when approaching guards in a shower room might be to switch off the lights and move in undetected in order to snap a few necks before anyone even realises you're there.

It's not yet clear how these elements will hang together, but no such question marks hang over the game's appearance. Use of normal maps ensures a staggering level of detail, while shadows are implemented expertly and Riddick himself, based directly on Diesel, is one of the most believable-looking characters ever seen in a game.

Definitely one to watch, then, and a pleasant surprise from Starbreeze, developer of the disappointing *Enclave*.



Though it's supposed to be something more than a straight shooter, the game features a raft of weapons, ranging from grenades to shotguns to miniguns. The results can be bloody



Raid on Butcher Bay

Butcher Bay is supposedly 'the most notorious prison in the galaxy', and it's separated into three sections – a 'max' level on the planet's surface, a 'double-max' area below ground, and a 'triple-max' section located in the building's tower. Escaping all will involve a combination of stealth, cunning and brute force – the latter being required against the game's less human staff members (above).

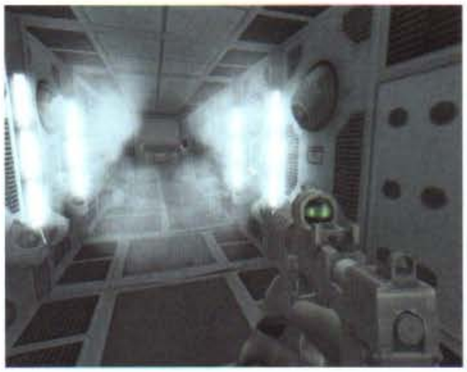
Killzone

Format: PlayStation
Publisher: SCE
Developer: Gueril
Origin: The Netherland
Release: Septemb

Previously in E127, E1

Grey in hue but much the opposite in terms of personality, our first serious Killzone playtest leaves us shellshocked











The most rewarding sections are those in which you encounter a group of shielded Helghast soldiers and have to draw them out of their hiding places using grenades and long-range fire





Finally, we've had a chance to sit down and play Sony's great white FPS hope extensively. Questions about its calibre in relation to *Halo* or *Half-Life* should be deferred, and are irrelevant anyway this is a title that has been created in isolation with a concerted attempt to bypass genre clichés. *Killzone* is confident and distinct – an it's shaping up to be a very important game.

Circulation of the first gameplay videos recently met with a muted response, with criticisms centring, bizarrely, on *Killzone*'s colour scheme. The predominance of grey in the environments is undeniable, and the sky remains overcast throughout, but it's rapidly apparent how this greyness is an important atmospheric signifier; it doesn't refer to the (impressively) detailed textures or (frequently) explosive action. The more futuristic a game tries to be nowadays, the more dated it can look. *Killzone*'s apocalyptic imagining is fine, making combat look brutal and inevitable.

The weapons feel like pieces of heavy machinery, not flashy toys. Everything from th handgun upwards is imposing and vicious, ar impression confirmed by the sound effects which are apparently derived from amplified recordings of stapleguns. There's a vicious kick to the hefty automatic weapons while grenade launchers bellow out smoke as they unload. Moving through the weapon classes you end up with rocket launchers that fill mor than half the screen, forcing your character tc stagger under the weight as you watch the missiles explode a mile into the distance. There's a great homing device too, allowing you to fire off a rocket before you swing roun to face your target – the missile swerves violently in mid-air towards its new destinatio

Some set-piece battles allow you to occupy monstrous gun emplacements, whicl produce hails of ferocious fire perfect for cutting through the swathes of Helghast swarming from dropships. In the heat of battl *Killzone* is frenzied, but remains strategic.

It seems that the squad-based plan is receding. You can't give commands to your colleagues and they don't appear to kill too many enemies, but at least they provide covering fire and don't get in the way. In som sections you're completely on your own as the mood switches from furious firefights to a stealthy ambush. An interesting contrast.

One aspect of the game that remains under wraps is multiplayer. It's easy to see how *Killzone*'s in-your-face aesthetic could adapt to deathmatch play. After this exhilarating taster, we can't wait.

Samurai Warriors



Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Koei
Developer: In-house (Omega Force)
Origin: Japan
Release: Summer 2004 (UK)

Can Koei's sprawling chop 'em up repeat its massive Japanese success in Europe?

Just when it seemed that Koei couldn't possibly yield any more yen from its *Dynasty Warriors* series, the publisher polled Japanese fans and found out that they would conceivably cough up for an outing based on the history of their homeland. And so *Samurai Warriors* transplants the franchise's feudal Chinese combat lock, stock and musket-barrel into Japan's savage Sengoku period, a cunning combination of market forces and market research that has already reaped dividends. During its first week on sale, *Sengoku Musou* (as it's known in Japan) shifted some 600,000 copies – no small Asahi, given that the second-best-selling console game sold a third as much.

Whether that success will translate into territories without such an interest in the setting remains to be seen, because *Samurai Warriors* brings little that's fresh to the fight. There will be a certain satisfaction to be had from single-handedly routing an entire field of foes, but unfortunately it's the same sense of satisfaction that started wearing thin several instalments ago. Even the cosmetic changes don't seem that pronounced – at first glance, the Japanese battlefields look and feel rather similar to their Chinese counterparts, while the interiors are bland, basic and, well, boring.

The majority of *Samurai Warriors'* reputed ¥700million budget must have been spent on super-sizing, then. The 90 new stages will offer over 500 missions to wade through – and wade through them you will. With some conflicts comprising both outdoor and indoor sections, it's possible to rack up a four-figure bodycount on a single mission. Furthermore, the five characters initially available – a rum mix of genuine historical heroes, including clan leader Sanada Yukimura and noted ninja Hattori Hanzon, as well as congruous Koei creations like Kunoichi, a saucer-eyed schoolgirl assassin – are augmented by a sizeable selection of unlockable protagonists, each with unique attacks and weapons.

So far so familiar, then. *Samurai Warriors* is essentially a bone intended for the series' most dogged disciples, and those that have stuck it out this far will be too busy salivating over its scale to worry about gameplay enhancements. If it looks like offering the unconverted little more than a potted history lesson, then at least the precedent set here has potential. Next time out, we'd like to see a more Anglocentric update, preferably set in early 1980s Brixton or Toxteth. Now that really would be something to get up in arms about...















Sengoku Musou has already chalked up sales of more than half a million on its first week of release in Japan. Now that Koei has abandoned the idea of using the Japanese name for the PAL release, there's a much better chance of success here

Evil Genius

Format: P
Publisher: Elixir Studio
Developer: Viven
Origin: U
Release: Q4 200

Playing a secret agent is an age-old theme, but what happens when you take control of the opposing side?



It's such a simple pitch you wonder why it hasn't been done before. *Evil Genius* lets the player take the role of Blofeld, of Dr Claw, of Dr Evil – international trademarks excepted – and challenges them to hold the world to ransom. It's a management game, of course, but this is no Machiavellian play in the mould of *Republic*, Elixir's previous release. *Evil Genius* is bright, fun and played entirely for laughs, hiding the complex interplay of hundreds of different object modules beneath slapstick spy-genre humour and some fine animation.

There are five components to the game. First the player builds their base, an exercise in *Dungeon Keeper*-style construction inside a volcano on a tropical island in the middle of nowhere. The second is minion training, where the player populates their world with a cocktail of scientists, thugs and henchmen and then refines the mix with education.



Attacking agents can arrive on rubber dinghys, approach the base in submarines, parachute in or land helicopters in island clearings

Research is the third, in which objects from around the base can be investigated and combined with others to produce new, mischievous forms of violent entertainment. The fourth element is the construction of 'cells' around the globe, which bring money and infamy but also attract the attentions of global security forces. The final aspect is defending your base from them and their special agents.

So, part of it plays like a standard construction game, part is more stand-offish and strategic, and part sees a hands-on approach, the player directing their henchme[n] around their complex in a similar way to *Commandos* or (perhaps more pertinently, given Elixir's Demis Hassabis's history) Bullfrog's *Syndicate*. Each of the henchmen, who serve as the right-hand men/women to your evil schemer, has a set of special characteristics and will interact positively or negatively with the rest of the team accordin[g] to their personality. Indeed, it's this domino effect that plays a big part in every aspect of play. While the game itself is simple, the number of objects interacting with each othe[r] gives rise to situations that are both impossible to second guess and immeasurably satisfying when they arise.

The real joy, though, is in the details. When characters interact they do so with wit and exuberance, and it's this and not the nea[t] and tidy mathematical mechanics that will lift the game above many others in the eyes of most PC gamers.

Evil Genius is a simple idea, sweetly executed, but in a heavily saturated strategy industry that may not be enough. The next months will see the really crucial powerplays take place – Vivendi's marketing battle for the blackened hearts and scheming minds of the management market.



People can arrive at your island in a number of ways. Some (tourists, for example, who mustn't discover your base) choose conventional means

Mwa-ha-ha-ha!

Some of the global territories have their own super agents, such as the British James Bond-alike. It's not easy to capture them, but once you've found their weakness they can be imprisoned, and that provides your character with an opportunity to gloat. Standing outside the cell door cackling increases your global notoriety, but every time you do it the door opens that little bit more, giving the character within a chance to escape. As with most of *Evil Genius*, it's all a question of balance...







Bases are hewn from rock in a similar vein to *Dungeon Keeper*. Rooms of any size or shape can be dragged out, and then populated with objects, which can be functional or simply ornamental



Forgotten Realms

Format: PlayStation
Publisher: Ata
Developer: Stormfront Studio
Origin: U
Release: Septemb

A trip to the dungeons inspires Stormfront to squeeze a lot of graphics out of PlayStation2







The simplest way to destroy creatures may also prove the most effective. Here, the player uses simple but brutal slashes to kill the serpent



Attack, attack, attack

Like *LOTR*, combat is simple. One button produces a weapon attack – staff, sword or knives – while another handles a blunt hands-and-feet attack – useful for stunning enemies – and the trigger operates range attacks. A third face button executes a block or duck, while the last produces a special move, but the real skill comes in stringing together combos by pressing the two basic attack buttons in quick succession. Novice players may be able to progress through the game by hammering X, but they won't level up their party very quickly.



Combine slashing with punches and stuns and you have the makings of a combo. The (apparently placeholder) gauge in the bottom left corner shows your party's health and special attack charge

We recall a visit to Electronic Arts' Chertsey HQ late last year, the publisher summoning us for a last-minute show-off of its Q4 roster. Stormfront Studios' *Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers* looked phenomenal then, just as it would on release, and we inquired of a meandering EA representative just how it was the developer had managed to eke quite that much out of Sony's hardware. "I'm not sure," replied the PR, "but we're very proud of it."

They had every reason to be, and that makes it all the more impressive that Atari has managed to snatch the studio away – and with it its impressive engine, now upgraded still further with still higher polygon counts. *Forgotten Realms* is a scrolling fighter in the same vein as *LOTR*, the structure as similar a fans of the EA games could wish for, with all the Dungeons & Dragons content hidden firmly (and neatly) underneath the slick high-poly visuals. This time the story comes from RA Salvatore, the best-selling fantasy author, with dialogue scripted by Emmy award-winning writer Bob Goodman. The script's pedigree is as high as the engine's, but success will rest on the gameplay departures it makes from *The Two Towers*.

The biggest change is that now the playe takes the role of three characters, switching in-game between rogue, fighter and conjuror with the D-pad. As you'd expect from a game that's essentially just *Golden Axe* rewritten with 21st century technology, *Forgotten Realms* follows videogame (and fantasy) clich to the letter. The rogue is fast and agile, with a stealth mode when she's in the shadows, the fighter is slower but stronger in melee comba and the conjuror has good ranged attacks bu a weak constitution. The game's AI takes control of the other two characters and show intelligence beyond simple bee-line attacks – a conjuror will provide bless spells during less fraught moments, and if the player is using th rogue's sneak skill the other characters will endeavour to stay out of enemies' view.

More interactive and dynamic environments make the adventures a little more varied – we watch as the party pushes marauding beasts into the cogs of heavy machinery to suitably grinding effect, and another where they find themselves isolated on a raft careering down a river. The D&D-consistent experience system means effectiv elimination of enemies grants a faster rise through the levels, but otherwise the game is the same dumb, fun sensation action gamers will be grateful for.

Mashed

Format: PS2, Xbox, P
Publisher: Empire Interactiv
Developer: Supersoni
Origin: U
Release: June 200

Left, right, stop, go… and fire – it's a simple formula that still works today, as Supersonic demonstrates…



Skewed, top-down view. Four cars, all cute as candy. Controls a toddler could understand – left, right, stop, start, fire. Lovingly designed tracks and the speed. Oh, the *speed*. None of this should matter. This is so over. So yesterday. So much… fun. Something that Supersonic never forgot in the first place. *Mashed* is the spiritual successor to the developer's PlayStation sleeper hit, *Circuit Breakers*. The formula remains the same: fall too far behind and you're out, but this dynamic has been updated with several new twists. Now, once eliminated, players receive a crosshair to aim at other racers. Square becomes circle and you're locked-on – ready to unleash a Tomahawk-style missile.

Which sounds gimmicky, but there's real depth. The scoring system is carefully structured to enable ebb and flow. With four players jostling (as far as we are concerned, it's the *only* way to play) you're awarded two points for a win and deducted two for coming last, with the middle of the pack scoring accordingly. First to ten gets the girls and glory. The result is that you find yourself going kamikaze to prevent your rival from winning.

The most refreshing things about *Mashed* though, are the tracks themselves – each overflowing with ideas. Most feature sheer drops, enticing shortcuts and hold-your-breath jumps, and you soon start naming them like 'Friends' episodes. So there's the 'The One With The Raft', 'The One Like Burnout' and 'The Icy One Which Ruins Working Relationships'. They're so well crafted that you instinctively sense the risk/reward value of each tantalisingly placed power-up. Discounting the air strikes, there are eight roof-mounted weapons in an arsenal that's as satisfying to interact with as you'll find in any shooter. Current office favourites include the super-destructive mortar and an oil slick that spontaneously combusts after a couple of seconds.

So far, so fawning. Obviously, there *are* problems. We've played several builds over the last few weeks, noting the impact which seemingly subtle changes to handling and track design make. Recently, fancy graphical touches have been added, causing a performance hit on some tracks. This should, however, be remedied in time for release.

Less likely to be solved is the camera, which can struggle to cope with the key hook of forcing trailing cars off screen. It's a small dent in an otherwise absurdly refreshing experience. *Mashed* will remind you why you got into gaming in the first place. It doesn't matter. You don't need to buy it. But since when was that the point?







One of *Mashed*'s greatest attractions is the way Supersonic has imbued each track with a great deal of character. This one (right) is an obvious homage to *Burnout*'s highway





Fight Night 2004

Format: PlayStation
Publisher: E
Developer: E
Origin: US
Release: April 3

EA responds to Rocky's Drago-heavy slugfests with a title that promises bee-sting precision





The fighters' facial distortions are impressive, as are the startling variety of camera-flash replays that follow a successful knockdown

Good old EA. Not content to rest on its laurels, it's brought the same spirit of control system reinvention to the *Knockout Kings* franchise as it did to its *FIFA* series.

Where *FIFA*'s off-the-ball runs feel unnecessarily complex, however, *Fight Night*'s system reduces boxing to its basics, echoing Sega's classic twin-stick arcade punch-up *Title Fight*. Blows are delivered via the right analogue – a tap forward throws a jab, a quarter-circle a hook and a semicircle a crunching uppercut. Awkward at first, the subtleties of the system quickly become second nature and create a control dynamic that punishes flailing but rewards fluidity.

This isn't to say that fans of the series will be disappointed, as *Fight Night* retains the essential elements of the series, expanding its roster to 32 fighters, headed by 'Matrix Reloaded' cameo Roy Jones Jr, and polishing them up to a gleaming sheen. DJ Spin Daddy provides bling-heavy commentary, and an expanded career mode promises longevity.

Even the facial-damage system's been improved until it almost rivals the meat-feast pizza effects of the earlier Rocky films. In fact, our sole reservation is that EA has abandoned the wince-inducing groin punch and hopelessly compromised the headbutt. A touch too sporting, then.





Even knockdowns spurn the traditional 'X' hammering, as your woozy fighter is challenged to align three images of the ref via the analog sticks to clear his head

Steel Fang

Format: P
Publisher: Seg
Developer: Capcom/Nextec
Origin: Japa
Release: Ma

Remember that talk of six billion players? Well, Sega still doesn't dream it's over...

The 3D online shooter is a concept Sega has been mulling over since the Dreamcast's genesis, a time when online gaming was going to be the company's unassailable USP. It didn't work out like that, of course, but the idea remained, and now it has handed it to Capcom to develop further. Like most online games, *Steel Fang* will begin life on the PC, developed by Capcom's *Code: Veronica* collaborator Nextech. It's a thirdperson shooter where the player controls a human and a robot guardian angel. When the human dies, the robot can resurrect him, which means it's important to keep the mech hidden. Not just for protection, either – since the robot provides attacking potency as well as defensive backup, keeping it camouflaged means it's possible to lead enemies into a trap.

The six-player game will feature both team (three vs three) and straight deathmatch variants, along with a handicapping system to ease new players into the action, something that's often a problem with online shooters. Nextech will only really get an idea of how it works when Beta testing begins. The game will be free to download and play during the testing period, which Nextech hopes will last around two months. After that a credit card will be needed to participate, at a cost of ¥980 (£5) a month.





If you're looking for a gaming reference point to grasp *Steel Fang*'s intricacies, think of it as being like *Devil May Cry* meets *Outtrigger*





Unfortunately, *Steel Fang* users have to connect through a specific ISP, @nifty, meaning that European users can't experience it just ye

Prescreen Alphas This month's announcements and updates...

Athens 2004

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Sony Computer Entertainment
Developer: Eurocom





There's still nothing to beat *International Track & Field* on PS1, but Sony is having a stab with this officially licensed simulation of the forthcoming Olympics. Looks pretty, but will it have the legs?

The Nightmare Of Druaga

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Arika
Developer: Chunsoft





Those who bought Namco's PS1 *Museum* titles will know of *The Tower Of Druaga*, originally a hit in Japan. Here's the PS2 update, with what its developer is calling a 'realtime turn system'.

Espgaluda

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Arika
Developer: Cave





The infamous Japanese arcade shooter comes to PS2, replete with its guard barrier feature. As a bonus, the game will come packaged with a DVD featuring footage of top players in action.

Karaoke Stage

Format: PlayStation2
Publisher: Konami
Developer: In-house





Rather than trusting our singing skills, this month Konami brought a professional singer to **Edge**'s offices to demo its new music title. It's a strong test of vocal talent, with super-cute graphics

Conflict: Vietnam

Format: PlayStation2, Xbox, PC
Publisher: SCi
Developer: Pivotal





Battlefield: Vietnam, *ShellShock*... there appears to be a trend appearing here. Pivotal's quietly successful strategic combat series is the latest to enjoy the smell of napalm in the morning.

Van Helsing

Format: PlayStation2, Xbox
Publisher: Vivendi Universal
Developer: Saffire





Based on the upcoming Hugh Jackman movie, this is a thirdperson actioner in the mould of *Devil May Cry*. It doesn't seem especially deep, but Helsing's grappling hook is neatly handled.

Second Sight

Format: PlayStation2, Xbox, GameCube
Publisher: TBC
Developer: Free Radical Design





The *TimeSplitters* team finally unveils its long-awaited thirdperson adventure project. Amnesia, psychic powers and a 'covert military mission in Siberia' are all said to prominently feature.

Ghost Master

Format: PlayStation2, Xbox
Publisher: Empire Interactive
Developer: Spiral House





Despite its potential, this missed the mark when it first appeared on PC. Now, Empire is giving it another shot, making it more action-heavy, with a conversion from the team behind the RPG *Silver*.





Driver 3

With its movie-like trailers, Hollywood voice cast and embellished edit suite mode, Reflections' latest game is going cinematic in its attempt to accelerate past Vice City and True Crime – and leave Stuntman just a distant memory

What is the defining feature of the current console generation? The PlayStation and the N64 distinguished themselves from their predecessors with the leap into 3D, while PS3 and Xbox2 are sure to hammer home the one-box-suits-all concept. PS2 and Xbox have largely failed to deliver on that promise, and with Sony dominating the scene for a second generation in row, the biggest games of the contemporary era have very familiar-sounding names: *Grand Theft Auto*, *Medal Of Honor*... and add *Driver* to that list. The difference between now and then is encapsulated in that little phrase 'production values'.

The slick presentation now expected of blockbuster games by a massmarket audience is the biggest challenge that currently faces game developers (and their finances). Cinematic CG intros, licensed soundtracks, celebrity voice actors, the landscape of entire cities recreated in recognisable detail – the stakes have been raised and there's no backing down.

The *Driver* series has been late arriving on PS2 and Xbox, partly as a result of Reflections' dubious dalliance with *Stuntman*, but also because of a realisation of the mammoth task in hand. *Vice City*, *The Getaway* and *True Crime* all co-opted elements of *Driver*'s cinematic auto-action essence and ramped up those production values to a factor of ten. Now that polished genre rivals are abundant, *Driver 3* has to be able to compete on that level to succeed and safeguard

Format: **PlayStation2/Xbox**
Publisher: **Atari**
Developer: **Reflections**
Origin: **UK**
Release: **June 2004**



***Driver 3*'s inclusion of Miami as one of its three locations appears to be a direct tilt at *Vice City*, showing how the Florida city can be fashioned with a more subtle and realistic approach**

the future of the franchise. If you've already seen *Driver 3*'s pre-release trailer, designed as an autonomous live-action entity with its own title of 'Run The Gauntlet', you'll know that Atari has chosen to fight fire with even bigger fire. 'Run The Gauntlet' was produced by Ridley Scott Associates, and while it's unlikely that the director of 'Blade Runner' and 'Gladiator' had any hand in proceedings, the end result is a world away from the usual cack-handed cut-up of fuzzy gameplay footage. The fact that Atari ruthlessly promoted the Ridley Scott Associates involvement, effectively running a press campaign for its press campaign, is classic willy-waving.

With Hollywood voice talent now a must, Michael Madsen and Michelle Rodriguez play Tanner and gang boss Calita respectively, although both are second-hand goods in this genre having previously lent their acting skills to *True Crime*. At least *Driver 3* should get good mileage out of the involvement of loose cannons Iggy Pop and Mickey Rourke. Reflections





The assurance of *Driver 3*'s vehicle physics is demonstrated by the way that Reflections' has convincingly conveyed the feel of flooring it in the bangers that inhabit Nice and Istabul



has dismissed game engine cut-scenes out of hand, preferring to let expensively-rendered CG tell the game's (clichéd but effective) story. It's the least that's expected.

"A relatively simple mission can become exciting if you buy into the story," suggests Reflections MD **Martin Edmondson**, "but it's difficult to be convinced by the story without the investment in quality cut-scenes. I definitely think that newer players can be frustrated at how primitive games can be sometimes. They expect movie-quality graphics and movie-quality music."

Isn't this an expensive and frustrating goal for developers? "It can be, but you have to think big these days. Obviously the publishers have greater involvement because they're providing a lot of the funding. But some of these aspects aren't as costly as you might think. Take the voice casting – it helps that we now have a generation of actors who grew up playing videogames and are keen to be involved. Michelle Rodriguez bought the original *Driver* game, and Michael Madsen wanted to do it so his kids thought he was cool. Five or ten years ago they'd either want a million dollars or they'd tell you to get lost."

"Riddling a car with bullets, shooting out its tyres, and then standing back to roll a grenade beneath its chassis. The resulting explosion sends metal parts flying into the air"

Phew. We haven't talked about the gameplay yet, but there's no need for suspicion. Reflections' strong point has always been its vehicle physics. The driving model and control system remain essentially the same as the PlayStation games, but the detail of the cars in *Driver 3*, exemplified by the hit-specific damage, is incredible. Handbrake turns, emergency stops, burnouts and donuts are more tangibly thrilling than ever. The balance between believable handling and Hollywood flair is expertly weighted. Meanwhile signposts, benches, fences and pedestrians scatter or deform with satisfying realism: the game is a joyrider's manual, and trumps *Vice City* with a vehicle selection that includes bikes, boats *and* trucks. A cute feature of the 18-wheeler is the ability to detach the cab from the trailer during a chase for tactical reasons, enabling you to motor away while tailing cops are thwarted by your weighty cargo. Bikes are a blast, presenting the opportunity for wheelie starts and stoppies – cosmetic, but enjoyable.

The game's three locations – Nice, Miami and Istanbul – have been chosen for their distinct qualities. Neither city is typical of its country, allowing the attention to detail in replicating significant landmarks and architectural styles to become all the more apparent. Those who've ever visited Nice will appreciate that a stroll along the game's interpretation of the Baie Des Anges is remarkably convincing, languid Mediterranean shadows and all. Away from the major thoroughfares, artistic licence is taken with the local geography, but crucially the atmosphere of each city is thoughtfully conveyed. This includes not just the type, but the condition and volume of cars on the road. It would seem incongruous to bomb through Istanbul's bustling passages in anything but a knackered Fiat.



Motorbikes are a welcome addition to *Driver 3*'s streets, with trademark vehicle detail extending to the way the suspension visibly bounces as you shift your weight around

Inside out

The questions begin to surface when Tanner exits the car. Reflections has always been far better at dealing with cars than human beings, and *Driver 2*'s over-ambitious on-foot sections were disastrous, even after being scaled down to a minimum in the final reckoning. Tanner's character model in *Driver 3* looks instantly far more convincing and there's more than a little of Tommy Vercetti in the way he cocks a shotgun.

Weapon damage is impressively thorough, allowing you to derive a great deal of enjoyment from simply riddling a car with bullets, shooting out its tyres, and then standing back to roll a grenade beneath its chassis. The









resulting explosion sends metal parts flying gloriously into the air and tyres will shoot off and roll towards you. Again, the car's the star. While the vehicles destruct immaculately, it's still a hassle to aim Tanner's gun in the required direction when on the move, with neither third nor firstperson viewpoints proving satisfactory. Under the duress of enemy fire, this is a fatal flaw that will need to be rectified.

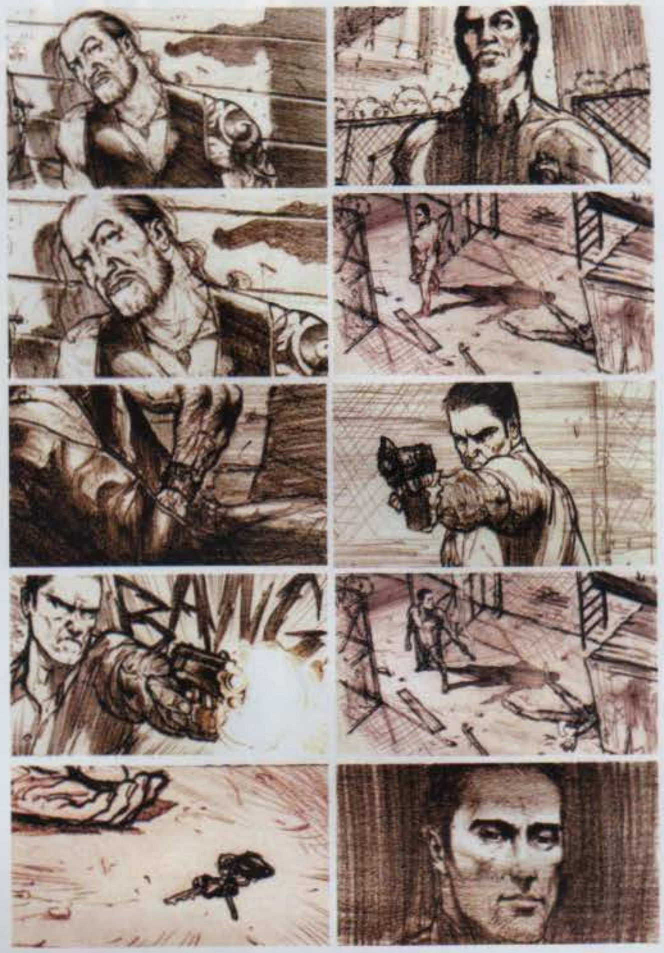
The direct route

Evidence of breathtaking innovation in *Driver 3* is scarce, but also unnecessary. However, the Film Director mode is a fine addition with the potential to extend the game's lifespan considerably. This clever toy – a full-blown exploration of the concept previously touched upon with the *Driver* games – allows you to place a series of movie cameras anywhere in the environment, including inside the car, on the front wheel or 30 feet in the air. You can then film a chase or stunt sequence (including out-of-the-car gunfights) and edit freely between the cameras, adding filters, zoom or slo-mo. It's a remarkably flexible tool, allowing for infinite re-editing and re-positioning of cameras. The whole game has been designed to look great in replays, and the Film Director mode allows you to utilise all the stock techniques of the movies to fashion the ultimate Hollywood car chase.

Edmondson, proud to be a movie car chase geek, is full of enthusiasm: "The game is all about Hollywood car chases, and you can't experience that feeling from the standard chase camera perspective. It's natural to want to reposition the cameras and play around with those chase sequences. Having said that, the Film Director function was a major, major undertaking for us. The environment has to be very robust to allow for that level of freedom. In straightforward racing games like *Gran Turismo*, the game is just designed in a tunnel."

So what's *Driver 3*'s crucial distinction from its chasing pack of big-budget auto-action competitors? "*Driver* is the only game that is a car chase simulation. We focus on the realism, the dynamics and the physics. If you're genuinely interested in cars, *Driver* is for you."

In reference to *Vice City*'s cheeky in-game parody, where a stiff-moving character called Two-Faced Tanner crashes and burns, Edmondson has a parting shot for Rockstar. "*Driver 3* is about driving. It's not about chopping people's heads off with a chainsaw."



The news that *Driver 3*'s story will be accelerated by a series of involved cut-scenes may have more impatient gamers yawning, but Reflections insists that investment in this seemingly peripheral element of the game will aid overall immersion





"You have to think big," says Reflections MD Martin Edmondson, in relation to the huge spend on *Driver 3*'s 'Hollywood' production values, involving Ridley Scott Associates

Back from the dead

There's a big surprise waiting in the woods for followers of Capcom's Resident Evil...





You are about to enter the world of survival horror. It's been a long time since that sentence, glowing white on black, triggered a frisson of anything other than familiarity. Which is what makes the attacks on *Resident Evil*'s new direction seem so extraordinary. Chances are you already know why the initial reaction from hardcore zombie-fanciers was so depressingly childish. Simply put, there are no – repeat, no – zombies in *Resident Evil 4*.

And if you're looking for an illustration of just how much the series has changed, it doesn't come much starker than that.

Maybe we're being contrary, but any game capable of triggering the sort of reaction this has must be doing something right. And, inevitably, the wounded fans have missed the point almost entirely. There are no zombies in *Resident Evil 4* in only the same sense that there are no zombies in '28 Days Later'. New enemies who are quick and cunning have replaced the shambling cadavers. They attack en masse, retreat when overpowered and seem like a logical evolutionary step after the aggressive 'crimson heads' introduced by the GameCube remake of the original game. "The enemies have to be smart, otherwise it won't be fun," explains **Hiroyuki Kobayashi**, *Resident Evil 4*'s producer. "And the one thing you can't expect

Genetic engineering

Capcom's infection has now shipped over 24m units, but how has it really evolved since its inception?

Resident Evil
PS, GC



Alone In The Dark can claim to have created the survival horror genre, but *Resident Evil* perfected the template and coined the name. The original is every bit as essential today as it was 1996. And, yes, the dog crashing through the window remains arguably the franchise's iconic moment.

Resident Evil 2
PS, DC, GC



The second game in the series, recently ported to GameCube, saw Leon S Kennedy make his debut alongside Chris Redfield's sister, Claire. Set before and also after the first game, the main hook was the chance to take two intertwining paths through the same story.

Resident Evil 3: Nemesis
PS, PC, GC



Jill Valentine returns from the first game for the most action-oriented instalment to date. Innovation was thin on the ground, but tight design makes this a fan favourite. The titular monster was a nearly indestructible killing machine that Umbrella had created to hunt down S.T.A.R.S. agents.

Resident Evil Code: Veronica X
DC, PS2, GC



First appearing on the Dreamcast, *Code: Veronica* was enjoyable but only really notable for its use of 3D environments. The *X* suffix was introduced for the PlayStation2 version, but it amounted to nothing more than three new cut-scenes and a revamped ending.

Resident Evil Ø
GC



This prequel was originally designed for the N64, but development was shifted to GameCube. Again using prerendered (but nevetherless astonishingly intricate) backdrops, *Resident Evil Ø* introduced a character swap system and insect enemies, but little else otherwise.

Resident Evil Outbreak
PS2



Innovation back on the agenda as the series ventured online for the first time. The core gameplay is classic *Resident Evil*, but with the additional possibilities offered by four human players. Offline only in Europe, but the portmanteau structure makes it worth a look for completists.

a zombie to be is smart." *Resident Evil 4*'s enemies aren't humans or zombies, you see, they're something else... something in between, and Kobayashi-san doesn't say it, but the word we hear is 'infected'. So this time you're facing off against crazies with farm implements who'll whistle to attract each other's attention and attempt to lure you into another area where more enemies wait in ambush, armed with crossbows.

Watching the astonishing video demonstration, it becomes even clearer why Capcom has put its walking corpses out to pasture. Whereas previous instalments have delivered improvements in small increments – with your quick-turn move you're really spoiling us – the fourth game threatens to reanimate the whole genre. And it's about time, too.

The one thing that hasn't changed is the star. Leon S Kennedy still models the same Jason Von Bondie haircut and Biggles flight jacket seen in the older, tantalisingly brief footage – but everything else has been cut. There's no sign of the mansion he was exploring or the hook-handed apparition that was stalking him. Instead, he's deep in the forests of an unnamed European country investigating the abduction of the US president's daughter. Six years have passed since the events of *Resident Evil 2*, when Kennedy escaped the destruction of Raccoon City together with Claire Redfield. Since then he has graduated from rookie cop to secret agent. Meanwhile, we're told that the Umbrella Corporation has been destroyed as part of a government crackdown. Something we don't believe for a second, secretly expecting Wesker to make an appearance in the final reel.

"Forget everything you've seen," **Shinji Mikami** intones, grinning devilishly on the screen. The











Kennedy's arsenal incudes grenades which send enemies flying through the air. The sheer number of attackers at once may initially prove overwhelming for survival horror afficionados used to dodging past a couple of cadavers. And take note: these foes know how to climb





It remains unclear whether you'll be free to explore the environment using vehicles such as this speedboat. What seems more likely is that they will be acquired for certain set-pieces – in this case a battle with a Loch Ness-inspired monstrosity

"The lights dim, the trailer rolls, and the most immediately striking thing is how gloriously detailed and open-plan the environments are"

director has just morphed out of a cut-scene from the original game in which the first zombie you encounter turns, creaking, to face the camera. Clearly delighted with the joke, Mikami-san apologises for being unable to attend and then invites us to "have a nightmare." The lights dim, the trailer rolls, and the most immediately striking thing is how gloriously detailed and open-plan the environments are. Graphically, *Resident Evil 4* is something of a revelation, and is at least the equal of anything current console technology has to offer.

Even in the trailer, *Resident Evil 4*'s newfound sense of freedom is palpable. The rapidly cut footage shows Kennedy diving through windows, kicking down doors and bursting heads like rotten plums. For the first time in the series, vehicles are also featured, and specifically we're shown Kennedy powering across a lake in a motorboat. Suddenly, a vast aquatic monster breaks the surface. We're clearly not in Raccoon City any more.

Moving away from prerendered backdrops and fixed cameras is a key element in *Resident Evil*'s reinvention. The gameplay is viewed using two camera angles, the default of which is a traditional thirdperson perspective that tracks the hero as he explores. The viewpoint shifts, however, when you encounter enemies. Press the right trigger for Kennedy to raise his laser-sighted handgun and the camera crash-zooms on to his right shoulder, leaving most of the screen free for targeting. Which is vital, because the deranged mountain folk have location-specific damage models. Shoot an enemy in the knee and he hobbles around to predictably amusing effect. More practically, you can blast weapons out of their hands – an idea that also extends to deflecting the axes and pitchforks that are often flung at you, *House Of The Dead*-style.

Ace a headshot and you're rewarded with splattercore instant death. It's a technique you'll need to perfect, given the dozen or so enemies usually found circling hungrily. Accurate aiming is also likely to be an important factor during encounters with the game's more exotic, boss-sized enemies – which include a chainsaw-wielding nutter with a

hessian sack over his head (you just may have already seen him elsewhere in the magazine), and an enormous creature that looks like it's moonlighting from Middle-Earth. Standing two storeys high, this overgrown troll hurls Kennedy through the air and attempts to stamp on his head – a scenario that presumably isn't exhaustively covered in the secret agent's handbook.

Return of the living dead

One of the most surprising things in *Resident Evil 4* is its control scheme, which remains largely unchanged. Don't throw yourself into that open grave just yet, though. During a hands-on session, we found that the old system makes more sense in its new setting. There is, however, one important addition to the controls in the form of some context-specific actions. During certain situations the 'A' button will blink on the screen, indicating that Kennedy is able to interact with the environment. This might involve jumping over a fence, ducking behind an object or knocking down a ladder in order to prevent the villagers from climbing up. In each case the effect is empowering. Although far from revolutionary (it recalls *Shenmue*'s QTEs) the feature is another indication of how *Resident Evil 4* has been skewed toward the action end of the spectrum.

The man to thank for all this is surely Mikami-san. He was asked to return as director because Capcom was unhappy about how the franchise he spawned – and which has shifted over 24 million units – was being re-imagined. Back at the helm, the prodigal son decided to scrap much of the existing work, starting afresh with a view to creating something more radical. It signifies a remarkable turnaround for the man who also created *Devil May Cry* and two years ago told a Japanese radio show that Sony manufactured the PS2 on the cheap so customers would have to buy replacements.

Of more consequence to Sony, Mikami-san is widely seen to be the catalyst behind the decision to make *Resident Evil 4* a GameCube exclusive, along with four original titles: *Viewtiful Joe*, *Killer 7*, *PN 03* and *Dead Phoenix* (the latter now cancelled).

"Jumping over a fence or knocking down a ladder in order to prevent the villagers from climbing up... Resident Evil 4 has been skewed towards action"

The accompanying statement from Production Studio 4 explained that the decision was: "For the sound growth of the gaming industry. For GameCube." In retrospect, the obvious omission was the phrase: "For Capcom". Having clambered so eagerly into bed with Nintendo, the publisher now finds itself jealously eyeing Sony's installed user base. The imminent arrival of *Resident Evil Outbreak* on PS2 (sadly stripped of network play in Europe) may well be an indication of where the future of the franchise lies but, for now, the good news is that Mikami-san is back where he belongs, concentrating on injecting new life into his creation. And it unmistakably feels like a Mikami game – aggressive,







The sub-machine gun will evoke fond memories among fans of the third game, which equipped Jill Valentine with an M16 from the start. She certainly needed it







QTE-style sections will frequently appear. Whether or not they'll work exactly as *Shenmue*'s is currently unknown



kinetic, exuberant, inventive and mischievous. His fingerprints are all over the shotgun, which blasts its victims through the air, an effect rendered more dramatic if you can slam the corpse into a nearby object. Indeed, the sheer amount of ordinance – Kennedy also has access to grenades, a machine gun and a sniper rifle – serves to underline the action-heavy nature of the gameplay.

More intriguing, perhaps, is what's going to happen to the puzzle aspect. Only the most masochistic players would want to see the continuation of item-ferrying, interminable backtracking and combine-this-with-that solutions, but it's currently unclear what's going to fill the void. One possibility is that the head-scratching side of the experience will also be more immediate and environmentally based. In the code we played, certain areas of the forest had been rigged with laser-activated explosives. Avoid these, and you stumble across a wolf caught in a mantrap. Shoot the mechanism and the animal escapes, but remains understandably wary. Alternatively, remove its paw with care and man temporarily has a new best friend. It's an endearing moment, and one that hopefully points to a more interactive, non-linear approach to the way the story will develop.

Reinforcing *Resident Evil 4*'s new sense of immediacy are barely perceptible loading times,



Contrary to what this screenshot might suggest, to blow off an enemy's head you no longer have to angle the shotgun upwards at an absurd angle. Instead, take aim, breath out and fire. The splattercore effect is pure Mikami

If you go down to the woods today...

The main cinematic influence on Resident Evil has always been Romero's 'Dead' trilogy, but the new game draws on a different tradition

The Texas Chainsaw Massacre



Leatherface is obviously referenced by *Resident Evil 4*'s chainsaw-swinging lunatic, but the influence of Tobe Hooper's cannibalistic nuclear family is also found in the unhinged villagers.

Friday The 13th: Part 2



Before acquiring his signature hockey mask, Jason Vorhees wore a bag over his head – which makes *RE4*'s psycho another homage. The murderous use of gardening tools is a more subtle lift.

The Evil Dead II



Again, it's the woodland setting and creepy little cabin, but Mikami-san is no stranger to director Sam Raimi's use of grand guignol violence, jet black humour and relentless pacing, either.

The Blair Witch Project



In the absence, on screen at least, of the filmmakers' tormentor, the trees take on a menacing quality. *Resident Evil 4* uses a grainy film stock-style effect to help achieve something similar.

Wrong Turn



In which Eliza Dushku battles mutant hillbillies and a restrictively tight vest. It's a country mile from being a classic, but *Resident Evil 4*'s enemies match the cannibals' resilience and bloodlust.

Cabin Fever



Sexually promiscuous teenagers trapped in a cabin are a genre staple. This time there's a virus on the loose – likewise in *Resident Evil 4*, although it's almost certainly Umbrella-engineered.



"We wanted to bring back the players who had started to feel that Resident Evil wasn't offering anything new, and in order to do that we had to change everything"

cut-scenes generated solely using the game engine and – praise the dark gods – no intrusive door-opening animations. The design now feels coherent, streamlined and thoroughbred. Ammo and health are now displayed as screen furniture, and the process of picking up items is also a lot less convoluted, with no need to dip into a separate menu just to confirm that, yes, actually we would like to pick up the shotgun shells thankyouverymuch.

End of days

The only real danger facing *Resident Evil 4* is that it risks sacrificing atmosphere and tension to appease a more trigger-happy audience. This concern, however, is unfounded. What the new game actually does is strip away all the niggling irritations that have blighted the series without losing anything from the core experience – which has always been about attempting to survive in a world gone mad.

Soon after the first scraps of information leaked online, scans were taken from subscriber copies of a US magazine carrying the exclusive. Once again, the internet went into overdrive, but this time the response was overwhelmingly positive largely because – as you can see – the game looks nothing short of sensational. Nonetheless, there is still dissent, invariably from the type of fan who's resistant to change of any sort. But then *Metroid Prime* also faced vehement criticism before anyone had even played the code…

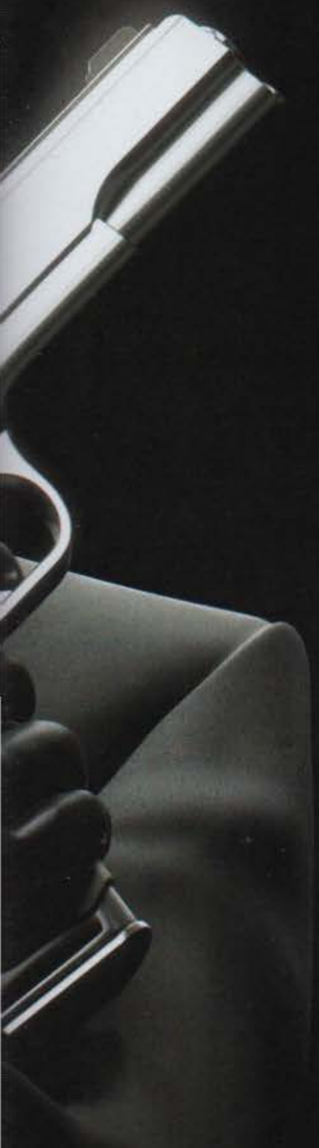
Irritating as it might often be, the force of opinion is also testament to how fiercely protective people can feel about the gaming franchises they grew up with. But emotional connections shouldn't halt progress. "We wanted to bring back the players who had started to feel that *Resident Evil* wasn't offering anything new," explains Kobayashi-san, who has been working on the series since *Resident Evil 2*. "And in order to do that, we had to change everything." Even if that meant abandoning the zombies who, spiritually at least, have always been the stars. Keep moving or die a painful death. Welcome to the world of survival horror.



Lighting plays a much greater part further into the game as the levels become darker, in this case with torches used for illumination. Moonlight will also feature



The hitman and him



Danish studio IO Interactive is one of the biggest independent development success stories of recent years, thanks to the popular adventures of psychopathic slaphead Agent 47. We met up with MD Janos Flösser, the man behind the hitman…

Janos Flösser leans over the fourth-floor balcony of IO Interactive's new Copenhagen HQ, admiring its spacious luxury. "We feared the open-plan design might make the place too noisy," he muses, "but actually I like it. Everyone can see everyone else and ideas are shared more easily." The impressive new building overlooking the Inderhavnen, which IO occupied in January, includes a canteen where staff can meet for breakfast and lunch. This is apparently an important aspect of the whole IO ethos. "I won't go as far as to call it a family, but there are a lot of friends here, a lot of experienced, self-motivated people who take responsibility for themselves and each other."

Flösser has striven to maintain this atmosphere at the company despite its rapid expansion. At IO's inception in 1998 there were seven members of staff, now there are 140. IO Interactive is Europe's 24th fastest-growing technology company according to Delouitte & Touche's Fast 500 list, and easily the highest entry for a game developer. No wonder it had to move to a bigger office.

A week after the relocation, Flösser is still marvelling at the space. "There's room for more expansion, and this area here," he says, indicating a large expanse of open floor, "is going to be our sumo wrestling ring."

Flösser is a former TV producer who met most of IO's founding staff when working on a programme about 'cyberspace' for the Danish National Broadcasting





Can the *Hitman* series get any grittier? By forcing Agent 47 to pass through abbatoirs, strip joints and Siberian blizzards, it appears that it can

Company back in the late '80s. He came into contact with a community of prodigious young hackers and bedroom coders who, due to a lack of opportunities in Scandinavia, would later disperse across the world to make videogames for companies such as Sony and EA. Flösser kept their phone numbers, and in 1997 decided it was time to entice them back to Copenhagen. They had already written an impressive game engine, which Flösser began to pitch to European publishers along with eight or nine game treatments, but *Hitman* was the idea that immediately fired everyone's imaginations. Eidos was the first to put its money on the table, and IO Interactive was born.

At the time, there was only one Danish videogame developer of any significance (ITE, creator of Hugo). Without any kind of home-grown industry to rely on, the fledgling IO team borrowed business models from game developers in the UK and the US. They soon realised that unless their games were going be top five per cent sellers, they would struggle.

"In my forecast it was 1.2 million units, so it is a surprise, a very good surprise! It gives me full confidence in the character. Agent 47 is one of the most interesting characters in computer games right now, so we can build a franchise around him."

Agent 47 is obviously crucial to the *Hitman* games' appeal, and he functions perfectly as a figurehead for a series. He's instantly recognisable, yet has no significant back story. His vocation as a cold-blooded killer precludes any emotional expectations for the character. This allows IO to plonk him into any scenario – or at least any scenario where undercover killing is required – without tiresome exposition. Flösser digs out some early sketches of 47, complete with bald head, barcode and red tie, proving that the distinctive hitman was remarkably well-realised from the beginning. "I've seen guys tattoo themselves with the barcode," says Flösser. "You cannot give him greater recognition than that."

As shown in the impressive opening FMV for *Hitman: Contracts*, Agent 47 has found himself in a spot of uncharacteristic bother. In fact he's bleeding heavily, and passing in and out of consciousness. The missions of *Hitman: Contracts* form a series of his flashbacks as 47 goes about his dirty work in locations as far-flung as Siberia, Hong Kong and Las Vegas.

"Agent 47 functions perfectly as a figurehead for a series. He's instantly recognisable, and his vocation as a killer precludes any emotional expectations for the character"

"These were scary figures for us," admits Flösser. "If you have a dream of setting up your own development studio, you have to try. Otherwise you might as well go and work for the government." As a result, IO was focused on creating bestselling videogames from the very beginning. The first *Hitman* game was a PC title, but only because PlayStation technology wasn't able to support IO's ideas at the time. "From day one we knew we had to hit the console market also," says Flosser. "We showed the idea to Sony, who liked it – probably because it is a controversial, politically incorrect, provocative concept."

The first *Hitman* game was celebrated for its mature approach, cinematic atmosphere, iconic anti-hero and unflinching violence. "The initial response was very positive toward the subject and the character," says Flösser, "but we took a beating on the control issue." Indeed, *Hitman* was a devil to manoeuvre, but the inviting scenarios compelled you to continue. IO had done enough to be granted a second bite of the cherry and, after rectifying the control system and adopting a console gaming mindset, *Hitman 2: Silent Assassin* went through the roof. It has sold over three million copies to date.

There's no great gameplay progression from *Hitman 2*, but IO has applied the 'bigger, better, more' approach, extending 47's arsenal with an attendant increase in gore. One particularly macabre mission involves Agent 47 crashing a party at an abattoir, and it's possible to hang victims' bodies on revolving meathooks.

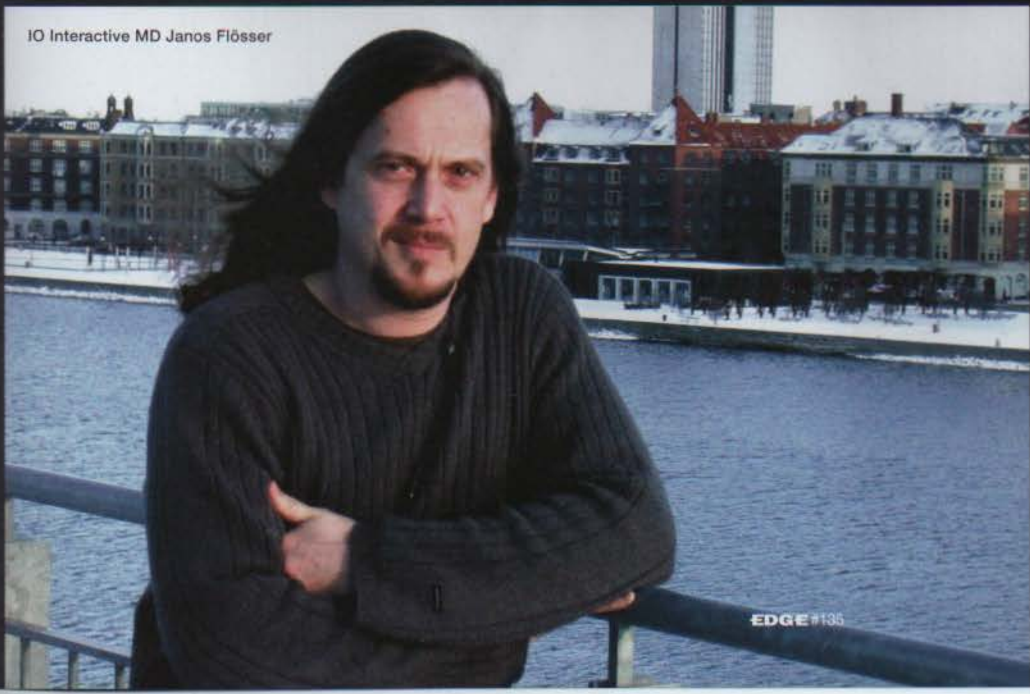
The overall aim is to eradicate all traces of Bond-style fantasy and heroism in the series. As Agent 47 snoops around a bleak Siberian naval base, you'd be forgiven for thinking that you're playing a *GoldenEye* remake. That's until you spike your quarry's soup with laxatives, follow him into the bathroom and strangle him while they take effect. Not very gentlemanly.

The graphical appeal of *Hitman: Contracts* is the feature that will really distinguish it from its predecessors. Fog engulfs the streets of Kowloon, with only the ambient


Photography: Mads Prahm



IO Interactive MD Janos Flösser



Viking invasion (part one)

Scandinavia's burgeoning game development scene is among the liveliest in the world right now. Along with IO Interactive, these are the hottest developers from the cold countries.



Starbreeze Studios (Sweden)
Home to *Enclave*, *Knights Of The Temple*, *Chronicles Of Riddick* (see p34) and more.



Funcom (Norway)
Scandinavian scene stalwarts, best known for creating the *Anarchy Online* universe



Innerloop (Norway)
Creator of *Project IGI* for Codemasters, and frequently admired for its 3D technology

Viking invasion (part two)



Digital Illusions/DICE (Sweden)
Stockholm codeshop that made *Battlefield 1942* and its sequel, *Battlefield Vietnam* (see p103).



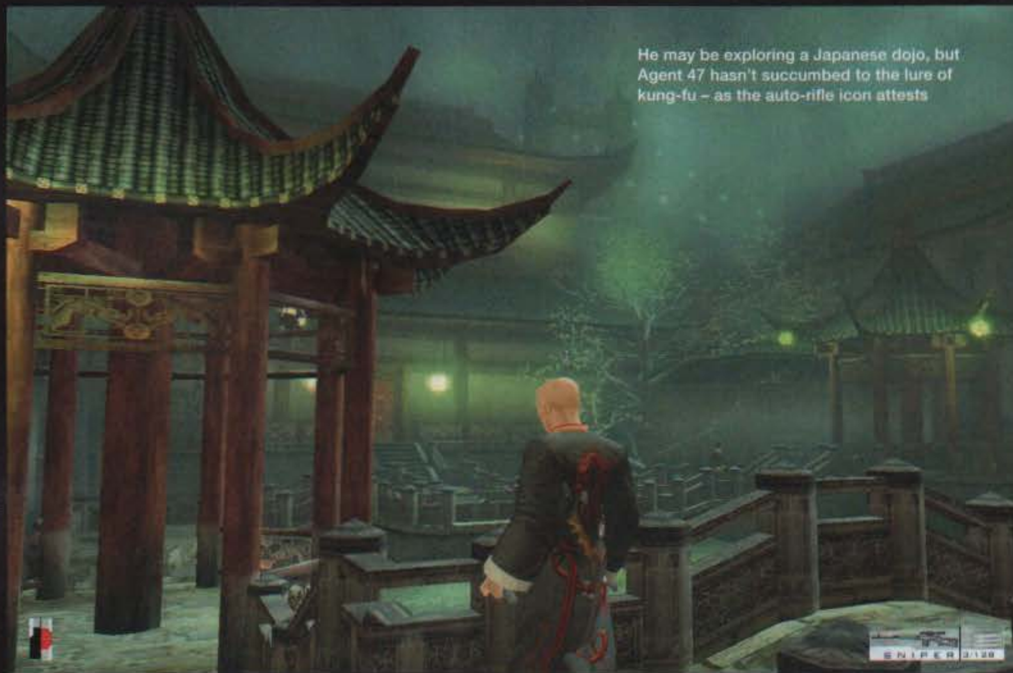
Remedy Entertainment (Finland)
In a land of mobile gaming firms, Remedy makes *Max Payne*. Power to its leather-clad elbows



Amuze (Sweden)
The team made Dreamcast hit *Headhunter* and its hirsute hero, Jack Wade. The sequel is imminent



Bald head, barcode, black suit, red tie. Proof that a character doesn't need an involved backstory to front a succesful franchise



He may be exploring a Japanese dojo, but Agent 47 hasn't succumbed to the lure of kung-fu – as the auto-rifle icon attests



Foggy streets are the ideal showground for IO's new post-scene filtering effects. The developer's stylings are clearly cinematic

glow of gently swinging lanterns to light your way. A storm rages in Siberia, and the rain appears to swirl directly into your face, impairing vision and progress. These are incidental effects, but implemented so convincingly as to actually affect your choices in the game and aid your immersion, all the more impressive when you realise that they are being demonstrated on PlayStation2.

"The success of *Hitman 2* has brought pressure to deliver, but freedom also," muses Flösser. "If you're in profit at the end of the year, that buys you artistic freedom. It means we can spend more time on introducing new technology to the series – fuzzy logic, improved AI, post-process filtering. When I look at the quality of the graphics in *Hitman: Contracts* I am pleased that we can stand up to any game in the world."

Denmark may not have much heritage in game development, but it does have a good technological infrastructure and strong support for both computer science and engineering vocations from academic institutions (witness the recent establishment of the Centre For Computer Games Research at the IT University Of Copenhagen). Flösser is happy that IO is in a position to reverse the brain drain of talented Danish programmers drifting abroad in search of employment. Many of IO's staff are Danes who have returned home after taking jobs in the UK, or talents recruited direct from Danish university courses. Flösser feels that this make-up lends IO Interactive a distinct flavour, although he admits there is little that's obviously Danish about *Hitman*.

"We get lots of comments from Danish people about how we are doing American-style games… but with all respect to the Scandinavian audience, they make up one per cent of our worldwide sales. Being big in Scandinavia has an emotional significance for us, but it doesn't have any business significance at all!" Still, there are subtle ways in which IO distinguishes itself within its games. "We can bring new approaches to existing genres," argues Flösser. "For example, I think the colour scheme and lighting in *Hitman: Contracts* would be entirely different if it had been designed by Japanese or American developers."

IO's working practices also seem to be distinctly Scandinavian, and to an extent influenced by its isolation from the traditional hubs of the game development community. The company prides itself on its internal communication and openness, hence the open-plan offices and the shared lunches. The layout of the studio integrates animators with level designers and artists with audio programmers. "A lot of game companies have excellent programmers, excellent designers, excellent artists and excellent people doing sound and music, but they're missing out on coordinating their departments," says Flösser. "Successful game development relies on this communication. We are also into networking and sharing ideas with other companies. You find some game developers that are very closed off, but not us. Anyone can come and visit us and we are happy to show them around. If we can help to improve the games industry as a whole, then this benefits us in the end."

Flösser is full of enthusiasm for the potential of his young company. In addition to *Hitman: Contracts*, IO is preparing a sequel to *Freedom Fighters*, its squad-based vigilante adventure from last year. "It wasn't the most original idea, but we tried to do innovative things with the gameplay mechanics. We have a long list of features we would like to improve on in that series."

"We are still growing. We would like to establish a third franchise, and we're working on that. There are a shitload of ideas in this company! You wouldn't believe it!"

Flösser is on a roll now. "We are still growing. We would like to establish a third franchise, and we're working on that. There are a shitload of ideas in this company! You wouldn't believe it! People are joining us from university with all this great training in physics and AI and engineering and they can try things here. And unlike the car industry, nobody is going to die if they fuck up!"

No licensed games, no secrets, no pressure and no automotive fatalities. It's an admirable creed, and one that has served Flösser well as IO Interactive continues to expand beyond his most ambitious expectations. *Hitman: Contracts* won't change the world, but it will be another high-quality title that allows IO to reinvest in its original ideas. Denmark's leading developer is flourishing under the kind of academic and governmental support that British companies can only dream of. Soon, Carlsberg won't be the country's only famous export.





The airy, spacious surroundings of IO Interactive's new Copenhagen offices. Sumo wrestling ring not pictured

The new pretender

A handful of months ago, many gamers had never heard of Sammy. Now it controls Sega and has some big plans of its own. So what's the real deal?

"Sammy," says **John Rowe**, president and CEO of Sammy Studios, "is really an engineering and manufacturing company." The bulk of what Sammy manufactures, and has done since its foundation in 1975, are pachinko machines. This game, wildly popular in Japan and mostly unheard of in the rest of the world, is a little bit like playing pinball with a thousand ball-bearings and no flippers. Sammy is by far the largest supplier of these machines.

The company has long had a sideline in videogames, publishing a not-especially-distinguished roster including *Guilty Gear*, *King Of Fighters* and *Lethal Skies*. It's becoming less of a sideline and more of a mainline, though, especially since last year's launch of the Atomiswave arcade system. It's not a pedigree that pleases game purists, and this is the background to the heated response its purchase into Sega has provoked.

The fuel for the fire makes ugly reading. After months of shilly shallying about a prospective merger between the two companies, Sega finally called things off last summer. Sammy was reportedly furious. Then, in December 2003, Sammy bought 22.4 per cent of Sega's shares from CSK Corporation, a computer services and outsourcing company

Sammy

Interview: Rick Rochetti, president of Sammy USA and director of Sammy Europe Ltd



Atomiswave has been criticised for being less powerful than other current arcade technology. Do you believe arcade games should still be competing in terms of power?

Our original goal for this platform was to be able to sell to the masses. Not only arcades, which are a big part of the market, but we also wanted to attack the street locations and retail locations. We've had great success with movie theatres, truck stops and bowling centres. We made Atomiswave affordable so it could go pretty much anywhere. Once you've bought into the system, you have the beauty of changing games for reasonably low prices. You don't have to move the machine – you change the graphics, you change the marquee, you change the instructions and you change the controls. Everything is universal, so the same cabinet can be a trackball game, a gun game or a driving game. Ultimately, though, the cashbox is what sells our games.

Were these decisions taken in response to the depression in the arcade market over the last few years?

All the equipment that's come out in the last five or six years has been good for the arcades, but very expensive so the returns aren't great. If you buy a driving game for, say, £15,000, at the end of the day did you make money in the first year or not? Did you make money in the second year or not? The return on investment wasn't there so people started to back off from the simulators, the expensive sit-down twins and all these big pieces, but they're needed to attract the people away from the really nice games on their PS2s and Xboxes.

So how can Atomiswave compete against home consoles?

People will still go out to play videogames if they're exciting and unique, and things like internet capabilities draw more players. Our system has that potential. We've only launched it online in Japan, but we're going to launch in the US, and then in Europe.

Many of the system's characteristics have been designed to serve the Asian market. What are your plans for Europe?

We need the right content. We need, say, a very good football game for Europe so we can get people competing in the pubs against players in other towns, so people can feel that they're playing Manchester United against Arsenal or whatever. That's all built in to the system. The net capability is there, the flexibility is there, the graphics are good and the price is aggressive. That's what allows Atomiswave to be successful. Now we're coming to the second generation of software and we have new games like *The Rumble Fish*, a very impressive 2D fighter. We have a nice mixture of products coming, and people are starting to think 'hey, this is real'. When Neo-Geo came out, they didn't make money on their first game, or on their second game. It took time to establish. With Atomiswave, we're not even a year in and we're starting to see the momentum. They are starting to believe.

Many arcade manufacturers have seen specialist peripherals as the way to entice players away from their home consoles. Do you share that thinking, or does it contradict Atomiswave's back-to-basics approach?

We're looking at all avenues. We made our own unique control systems. We tooled and designed our own 27-inch pump-action shotgun, which we use on our hunting series. We are making things that separate us from the home games, that players can't get from their home experience. Our hunting series – it's not part of the Atomiswave programme yet – has sold over 16,000 games into the bar market in the US with *Deer Hunting*, *Turkey Wing* and *Trophy*. We know that controls draw players, but once they're there the content has to deliver and it has to be simple enough so someone can play them with a beer in one hand.

Where do you think the future for arcade gaming lies?

I say: 'Why can't we go to Sainsbury's?' I don't see videogames in there. You go to the store and they may have kiddie rides, but I don't see videogames there. I don't see videogames anywhere outside of the traditional arcades in England and there are opportunities. There are pizza chains, there are retail chains and that's what we want to break into.

At the moment, though, non-arcade UK game machines are dominated by fruit machines and touch-screen games offering cash prizes. Where do videogames fit in?

It's a big issue because the competition from gambling machines is so strong in the UK. You and I know that, at the end of the day, if someone can win £25 or £40 then it's tough for us and for our games to compete with that. We haven't approached cash prizes yet, but once we can get the online working and get the right genre of sports going for the marketing, then we'll look at that. These touch-screen games are very strong in the UK. I've talked to some of those companies – they've approached us, we've approached them and we'd welcome any opportunities to create games for that market. What was that top quiz show in the UK? 'Who Wants to Be A Millionaire' – that was a phenomenon that brings together touch-screen and cash prizes. So that is definitely something we have to attack.

that bought into Sega in 1984. This made Sammy the majority stakeholder. Soon after that, Sammy CEO Hajime Satomi issued a threat, announcing that Sammy would consider buying further shares in Sega and reducing it to a subsidiary if Sega did not cooperate with his plans for the company. A few weeks later, shareholders appointed him Sega's new chairman.

There are reports from Japanese insiders that the mood is very bleak at Sega. Some say that Sega president Hisao Oguchi, who opposed the Sammy merger, will have no option but to resign and that key Sega staff, such as Toshihiro Nagoshi, Yuji Naka and Yu Suzuki will follow. All this is unconfirmed. But what's also unconfrimed is the existence of any concrete evidence to support the rumours currently circulating that Sammy intends to demolish Sega as we know it.

Sega doom-mongers have three main fears for the future of the company under Sammy. The first is that Sammy will either abandon or emasculate Sega's console development activities. There's certainly reason for these concerns: Satomi-san's bullish (although accurate) statements to the press emphasised the loss-making nature of Sega's consumer projects (-¥2.5billion/ £12.3million) as opposed to the substantial profits of their arcade division (¥5.6billion/ £27.6million), and indicated he would requir Sega to select its home console releases 'more strictly' in the future. Nor have any reassuring announcements concerning the current Sega projects been forthcoming.

In lieu of any official word from Sammy, the best clue perhaps lies in Rowe's assessment of the company's current position: "Is the pachinko market saturated Absolutely. You might be able to garner a little more market share, but in terms of tota units it's not a growing business. And so Satomi-san wants to build an international interactive entertainment division where the is room for expansion, and that certainly includes console gaming and likely PC gaming as well."

It's a statement that is at odds with the idea of Sammy intending to wind down Sega's home console business.

However, it says nothing for the nature the quality of games that will be produced from that division. Despite being cherished by dedicated gamers, it's no secret that many of Sega's more groundbreaking titles, such as *Rez* and *Shenmue*, were a commercial disaster. Rowe again: "The first

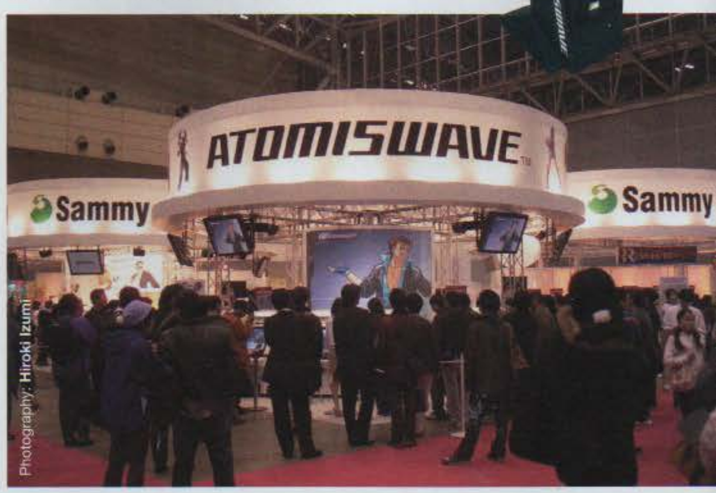
Sammy

Atomiswave

Inside the cabinet

Sammy's Atomiswave arcade system is based on Dreamcast technology, and has been criticised for being underpowered even compared to Sega's own outdated Naomi board. Introduced just over a year ago, its main strengths are its low cost, modular nature and the ease with which operators can change games. The system's standings were recently boosted by SNK Playmore's announcement that it will be abandoning the aging Neo-Geo system and bringing *King Of Fighters*, *Metal Slug* and *Samurai Spirits* to Atomiswave. Sammy's own plans for the machine include *The Rumble Fish*, a fighter, and *Ranger Mission*, a lightgun-driven military rescue simulation game.





Photography: Hiroki Izumi

thing we have to think of when we start making a game is whether we go for the casual or the hardcore market. And there's ten times as many of one as the other."

Sammy Studios' current output, previewed over the following pages, gives an early indication of the kinds of games that sort of thinking will produce.

The next fear is that Sammy will plunder Sega's IP to promote its own, lower-quality arcade titles. Again, there's no official word on this, but a number of factors make it unlikely. The first is Sammy's intense pride. The strength of belief that the firm has in Atomiswave is impressive, although only time will tell if it's well-founded. There's every intention to see the brand succeed on its own merits, and with its own titles. The fact of the matter is that the places where Sammy wants it to succeed (see Rick Rochetti interview) – the developing world and the non-arcade environment in the west – are places where the likes of Tails and Knuckles mean very little at all.

The third fear, that Sammy will empty Sega's lucrative arcade floorspace and fill it with its own, more profitable pachinko and pachinko slot machines, is probably the least well founded, since it contradicts everything about Sammy's position as Rowe sets it out. There's no reason for Sammy to want to weaken Sega's stronghold on the arcade, especially since Rochetti makes it clear that there's an awareness that Atomiswave's most lucrative market is almost certainly in a non-traditional setting. There's no reason to assume that the two brands couldn't exist side by side, catering to different markets.

Nothing, at this stage, can be certain except perhaps one thing: Sammy wants it all. The overwhelming tone of the company at the moment is one of ardent, aggressive ambition. There's a perception among gamers that Sammy isn't interested in them, and to some extent that's justified; the company's eyes are firmly fixed on the vast, untapped market of current non-gamers.

However, that doesn't mean Sammy doesn't want to make money out of gamers, and the way to do that is to make games that they want to buy. As Rowe makes clear, Sammy is well aware that if gamers don't like what they're getting, they'll vote with their wallets and buy from someone else. Sammy simply doesn't act like a company prepared to let that happen. The next few pages will give some indication of whether or not the company will succeed.







Sammy has some way to go in making its Atomiswave output palatable to non-gamers. *The Rumble Fish* (main), *Dolphin Blue* (above left) and *Demolish Fish* are traditional experiences

Sammy

Interview: Hajime Satomi, president and CEO of Sammy, recently appointed chairman of Sega



Sega's stockholders, and the stock market in general, seem to have greeted Sammy taking control of Sega very favourably. How have you convinced them?

Sega was in need of a leader and the stockholders felt that the management was lacking direction. The stockholders are looking forward to new leadership.

Atomiswave cabinets aren't currently the most popular in Japanese arcades. Why do you think that is?

You're absolutely right, they're not popular in Japan. The system itself has received extremely favourable reaction worldwide. The only reason it's not popular yet is because we haven't been able to offer great content.

If Sammy and Sega work together to provide great content, I'm absolutely sure that Atomiswave will become a huge hit.

What is the real value of Sega to Sammy – is it in its staff, its intellectual property or its brand name?

The existing employees of Sega, and especially middle management, are a real value the company offers. And of course, their brand name has great value too. Also, Sega has more than 500 stores in Japan, and this is something you don't establish overnight, so it's also a great asset.

The Dreamcast was a high-profile failure, and Sega's attempt to establish itself as a multiplatform developer has also stumbled. What mistakes do you think it made?

Sega had very unified development teams and after the failure of Dreamcast they divided the teams into nine subsidiaries. Losing this structure and control was one of the major factors for their disappointing performance. Very soon we're going to bring all the development staff back into Sega. I believe we can restore the strength of Sega's development under strong leadership.

How do you picture the global arcade business in ten years' time? What does Atomiswave have to offer Europe in particular?

Developing countries will help expand the arcade game market. China, South America and Eastern Europe are examples of growing arcade markets. If we look at the arcade market from a worldwide perspective, it's still evolving and will be a huge business in ten years. Atomiswave can play a central role in this development. The machine itself will evolve in ten years. Right now you can switch software by changing cartridges. In the future we hope to make new content downloadable through online networks.

The success of Sega's arcade division has been boosted by inventions such as the card save system used for *Virtua Fighter 4 Evolution*. Will Sammy continue to pursue this kind of innovation?

Yes, Sammy will pursue this, and not just the card save system but cutting edge technologies. Our goal is always to create and introduce new technologies into the videogame market.

What do you think is Sega's finest game?

I have two favourites – *Sonic*, which has been selling well for over ten years, and *Phantasy Star Online*, the first online console game in the world.





These arcade machines could hardly emphasise better the contrast between the approaches of Sega and Sammy. The Atomiswave is about flexibility and economy, whereas Sega's *The Quiz Show* is arcade gaming at its most elaborate and baroque. There's no question whose vision Sega's shareholders find more reassuring

Sammy Studios

Inside

Sammy Studios

Sammy Studios, housed in a startlingly sun, sand and sea-inspired techno-barn, was founded four years ago under the impetus of Satomi-san. Now headed by **John Rowe**, formerly head of product development at Midway, it's a studio that's guided by some passionately held principles.

"We know exactly what we want to do," says Rowe. "Our game philosophy is growing out of the projects we have in development. Everything we do is to support gameplay based on characters, characters embedded in a place, a time and an environment we want you to become immersed in. We're not about sports action games and we're not about racing games. I don't want to use clichés like 'interactive movies,' but we want the emotions of these characters to come through."

Isn't that a dangerous place to start for something which has to become a good videogame? Rowe catches himself: "It has to start with the gameplay. Finding the fun is something we do early rather than later. We don't just sit around drawing cool characters and then alter the gameplay to fit."

Rowe is irrepressibly passionate about games and the industry. Over the course of the interview, conversation flits past the escalating cost of game development ("We're going to stifle innovation and kill profitability,") the curse of cables ("I said to Kutargi – Ken, you've got to do something about the damn cables") and censorship in games ("Where would I draw the line? Nowhere! Screw the politicians and screw the religious right!").

Over the next few years, the output of Sammy Studios will demonstrate how well Rowe has brought his passions to bear on the games being made there. As things stand, the roster stands at four – two Japanese-developed games, one top secret project ('a thirdperson/firstperson shooter-action-adventure game,' to be precise), and its front runner, *Darkwatch: Curse Of The West*.





Sammy

Darkwatch: Curse Of The We





So. It's a firstperson shooter vampire western – that's the first thing you need to absorb. And it's being overseen by the people who made *Oddworld*. *Darkwatch: Curse Of The West* was never going to be ordinary. Headed by Farzad Varahramyan and Chris Ulm, both veterans of Oddworld Inhabitants, Sammy Studios' first 'real' game has some grand ambitions. Backed by a minutely detailed backstory, *Darkwatch* reinvents the wild west, and sets itself up against the highest benchmarks in the genre.

The game's hero, Jericho, makes his living as a train robber. The game opens as, in a bout of pretty immense bad luck, he unwittingly picks out as his next target a train which is transporting a vampire lord to be incarcerated at the headquarters of the Darkwatch, an ancient organisation dedicated to the extermination of his kind.

Jericho, a committed loner, would happily walk away but has received a vampire bite only the Darkwatch can cure. Destinies conveniently entwined, he sets off with the shapely Cassidy to find Darkwatch HQ while the vampire virus in his blood starts on the slow job of reconfiguring his genes. Thus, as the game progresses, Jericho will evolve a vampire jump, which feels a little like a rocket jump without the rocket, and vampire vision that lets him zoom in with his eyes rather than relying on a scope like normal people. With eminent common sense, *Darkwatch*'s developers started with the multiplayer. What better place to make sure the movement and weaponry – the co of any FPS – are rock solid? As well as accelerating development on the heart of th game, it gives time for the trickier elements of the singleplayer – particularly enemy AI and scripting – to be perfected before trying to integrate everything together. Not least because there's a lot of everything. As well as what you'd expect of a gun-slingin', stree swaggerin' FPS, there are horse-riding and vehicle sections, as well as minigame-style set pieces which the designers are adamar will grow organically from the skills and techniques inherent in the main gameplay.

On top of that are boss sections, pitting Jericho against enormous, cackling monstrosities. One of the most satisfying



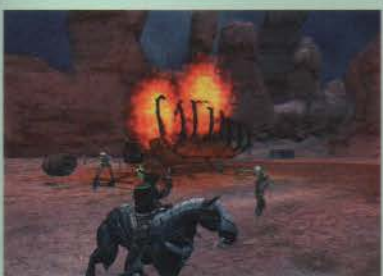


Without playable code it's impossible to be certain how well the horse-riding will work, although Sammy promises it'll not be like a Warthog. Melee attacks convert to a fearsome rearing move

Format: PS2, Xbox Publisher: Sammy
Developer: In-house Origin: USA Release: Q4 2004







Enemy design is both visually and tactically varied, with TNT-toting skeletons presenting a very different challenge. The golden gleam of the gunslinger's eyes is highly unsettling







elements of *Darkwatch* is the brutality of the weapon design. Every gun comes equipped with a murderous-looking butt, a colossal studded hammer or a gleaming curved blade. You hate to think what they'd do to your shoulder on recoil, but you can't wait to pile in to a likely-looking posse of cowboy skeletons. They're explained by *Darkwatch*'s clever technology rationale. The Darkwatch, in the course of its centuries-long war against vampires, has developed a technology which is entirely dependent on vampire by-products. Look closely and you'll see that some of their slinkier agents wear shirts sewn from vampire skin as a handy, if gruesome, way to borrow the vampires' greater tolerance to bullets.

Too many games fall into the trap of becoming easier the better you are at them, as good players unlock upgrades and stockpile supplies they don't need. *Darkwatch* has a clever built-in balancer. As Jericho cuts a bloodied swathe through the massed undead, his reputation grows. The deadlier you are, the more enemies will hang back, using cover and breaking out the big guns. Get a reputation as a pushover and they'll stroll out to take pot shots, presenting you with ample opportunity to hone your aim and make a name for yourself.

Sammy isn't letting anyone play *Darkwatch* just yet, so there's no way to be sure if the team's meticulous, experienced approach will pay off. Of all game genres, the FPS is one of the hardest to judge until it's under your thumbs.

There's no question, though, that this team knows a good game from a bad one. They gather like clockwork, twice a month, and devote their Friday nights to epic gaming contests. It gives the team a daunting combination of a professional's expertise and a gamer's enthusiasm, and makes *Darkwatch* a captivating proposition.



Sammy

Spy Fiction

Format: PlayStation2 Publisher: Sammy Developer: Access Games
Origin: Japan Release: Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)

A title that's already out in Japan, *Spy Fiction* takes its inspiration not from the current flood of stealth titles but from classic series such as 'Mission: Impossible' and 'The Man from UNCLE.'

A traditional thirdperson action game, its secret weapon is a camera which lets you record the appearance of anyone you see, and impersonate them perfectly.



Disguising yourself with someone's face can be a risky business. If you run across them, they'll raise the alarm immediately

It's a premise executed with care and imagination. Choose to play as the male character, Bishop, and you'll gain the edge in fights but won't have the option of impersonating the women you encounter.

The female character, however, can impersonate anyone – presumably resorting to a gruff voice and a scowl when required to be someone male. Your camera allows you to capture a simple body disguise from a distance, but you'll need a much closer and cleaner shot to get a face or a voiceprint. Once disguised, however, you won't have access to your special ops moves or kit, which turn you invisible when crouched stationary and let you crab-climb up walls and along ceilings.

Sammy is putting a great deal of effort into touching up *Spy Fiction* for a western release, improving lighting and detail and re-casting and re-recording all voice acting, a huge undertaking considering that the Japanese original was already presented entirely in English.



These before and after shots show the impact that Sammy's polishing will make to the look of the game. The intricate architecture, combined with the acrobatic agility of your character, means multiple solutions are always available to each stealth-based puzzle

Sammy

Seven Samurai 20XX

Format: PlayStation2 Publisher: Sammy Developer: Dimps
Origin: Japan Release: Out now (Japan) TBC (UK)



Racking up combos charges up your special twin-sword attack. Once unleashed, the seconds tick down, giving you an incentive to score as many hits as possible before your time runs out and normal rules prevail

It's a licence that you expect to be approached with reverence and restraint, but instead Sammy has adapted 'The Seven Samurai' with an abandon that will horrify purists and intrigue neophiles. It takes the basic premise of swordsmen sworn to protect a village, and teleports it into a vibrant future world of hacking and slashing. And, as if the licence itself didn't carry enough clout, Sammy has brought in artist Jean Giraud, better known to comic readers as Moebius, to design the characters.

So, if the game is taking neither the characters nor the setting from the film, where's the value of the licence? The developers have tried instead to take their cues from the action of the film, creating levels that pit your lone swordsman against a wave of horses which you lure into a narrow pass, as well as more traditional free-for-alls.

Already out in Japan, it's not without its disappointments, the most surprising being that, despite the name, you can only play as one character. Although the combat is simplistic, charging up a twin-sword frenzy attack is satisfying and spectacular.



The strength of the character design makes it all the more disappointing that only Natoe (below, centre) is playable. Still, it certainly gives Sammy a place to start for a sequel







Pride of Guildford

A trip to see Lionhead's 2004 line-up? Predictable, maybe, but this time Molyneux and friends have something to show us...

We almost knew what to expect from a visit to Lionhead. The developer is still largely working on the same projects it was last time we visited, close to two years ago. They are *Fable*, Big Blue Box's thirdperson fantasy RPG; *BC*, Intrepid's shot at living like cavemen; *Black & White 2*, the sequel to the PC strategy monster; *The Movies*, **Peter Molyneux**'s movie-making strategy game; and *Unity*, Jeff Minter's spiralbound shooter. The sixth is as yet unannounced and under NDA, but is a family-targeted multimedia strategy game. The seventh is the pretty-much-mythical *Dimitri*, which will become slightly more real in a couple of months when the first screenshot appears.

So what can you say about the games, or Lionhead, that hasn't been said before? Good question. Later, we ask the same question of a friend: "Um, how about, 'LOL that Molyneux is well buff OMG. No, wait, that's been said," he replies, causing us to pause and wonder what sort of internet backwaters he hangs around in. "How about '*Fable*, eh? Shit!'" he continues, and this time he has a point, because the one thing that previews rarely touch is objective criticism. You can't say anything until you have an opportunity to play the game, so the theory goes, and we don't get that today – contractual obligations with Microsoft put paid to that. We *are* offered the opportunity to channel our gameplay













Fable* features a reputation system passed from NPC to NPC, so your good or evil rating changes with time and your actions. Far right: beast wars in *Black & White 2

wishes through Molyneux, who is currently meandering through the training level, pottering around in a lush, green village.

The area looks like a D&D *Phantasy Star Online*, done with Xbox superpowers. It looks spectacular. "This is not an area I would call spectacular," replies a confident Molyneux, not known for understatement. The training level, it's said, defines the rest of the game, introducing players to the concepts that make *Fable*, namely the good and evil decisions that make the player's game-wide reputation. In it, the player is a young boy on a mission to earn enough money for his sister's birthday. Coins can be earned by performing tasks, but tasks often diverge along paths of good and evil. One sees the player confront a child and a bully – does he help the child, or help the bully? Elsewhere, a farmer tasks them to look after some supplies for 60 seconds, during which time they can either stay still, leave, or run around smashing up the poor yokel's stuff.

It is the third demonstration of the good/evil dichotomy that really catches our attention. Wandering around the blind side of a cottage, the child catches a man and woman in an illicit clinch. The man pleads with the child not to tell his wife, offering him money in exchange for silence. So what does the player do? More pertinently, what *should* the player do? Is telling tales good or evil? Won't letting the man's wife know he's cheating bring instant heartache? Perhaps she'll accuse us of lying, in which case the magazine's burgeoning reputation as an evil entity will only increase. The choice is stark, the moral repercussions complex. Best to keep quiet. This, it turns out, is the evil option.

There are worse things to do. Molyneux recalls watching one tester diligently wooing the daughter of a town mayor. One of *Fable*'s unique features is that your lead character ages – that you play through his life, not through a two-day period of it – and part of that is being able to marry. After the tester had wed the mayor's daughter, he led her father to a secluded area of some nearby woods and slaughtered him. Then, on his return to the family home, he closed all the doors and murdered his wife, too. Why? He'd worked out that the mayor's wealth would pass to the daughter on his death, and he'd get the money when she died. Clever. Evil.

"A pubful of people shouting your name in delight is satisfying, but doesn't compare to when the whole room cowers before a thoroughly evil you"

The reputation aspect of *Fable* has been well-recorded in these pages before, but seeing it in action makes it a little more impressive. As a *Fable* denizen we walk round a village as Molyneux explains that reputation is not necessarily game-wide. It is transmitted from NPC to NPC, virally, and so acting like an idiot in front of one child might cause a whole crowd of them to snigger at you in a couple of days' time. We witness the extremes of reaction – the thrill of a pubful of people shouting your name in delight when they see you is satisfying enough, but it doesn't compare to the feeling you get when the whole room cowers before a thoroughly evil you. Between those two points lies a smooth transition from dislike to admiration. In mathematical terms, your evilness is just a rational number, anywhere on a line between plus and minus one.

Combat is the final thing Molyneux wants to demonstrate. "This has taken as long as any other part of the game," he says, illustrating the complexities by getting hit a bit and falling over. "I should really get someone in here to demo it while I speak. It's very hard to do both at once." He soon picks up the art, however, and takes us through the control system's subtleties. There are three disciplines (hand-to-hand, ranged combat, and magic), and the face buttons execute attacks relating to each, displayed on a context-sensitive menu in the bottom-right corner (the bottom left shows a similar thing for the D-pad, this time relating to passive interaction). As players land consecutive blows a combo meter in the top left ticks up, allowing skilled players to inflict greater damage and receive greater rewards.

It is an intuitive system, which allows beginners to progress while retaining interaction satisfaction for experienced gamers, and it's clear it's taken a long time to perfect. *Fable* has been through some difficu times; a year ago, when the project was looking uncomfortably interminable Lionhead took a number of people off various projects across the studio and put them to work on *Fable* instead. That pulled it through, and on the day we visit the game has hit alpha. There is still plenty to do – in the studio hallway there is a giant whiteboard with average tester ratings for missions, and Molyneux notes that many of the levels are going to have to be tweaked significantly to send the scores stratospheric.

Going clubbing

BC, also due out before the end of the year, does not have *Fable*'s looks. It's not that it's an ugly game, not by any means, just that it's not as visually striking; not as conventionally beautiful. On the wall of Lionhead's boardroom is a list of ten phrases from which *BC*'s back-of-box blurb will be drawn. The words concern TRIBES and BLOOD and DINOSAURS and ACTION, but essentially th carefully constructed sentences could all be replaced with one: Be Lots Of Cavemen. No the academic definition of cavemen, but one we all think of. The one where you hurl spear at dinosaurs and discover fire and speak in



carefully chosen monosyllables and wear modest, elegant loincloths 50 million years BC. The *interesting* one.

The demonstration takes place in Lionhead's testing department, where two sullen teens doing volunteer work slink off for lunch and leave Lionhead's lead tester to take us and Molyneux through the game's progress. He starts by fighting a T-Rex, one of the games earlier set pieces. "This is just a baby," says Molyneux, pointedly. "Later you'll meet one twice as big." Always bigger, always better, and it's true that it's going to be moments like this that will sell *BC*. Those are the back-of-box taglines, but the game's appeal is more subtle.

The physics system, for a start: large boulders can be broken into smaller rocks, which can be pushed down hills, and roll down naturally according to their shape. Or the strategy elements: broken rocks can be laid in walls. Perform this action with one tribe member, and others will start to follow. Switch to a different person and start to climb trees to collect fruit, or pick a party and go out hunting for dinosaurs. It is freeform in nature, but focused in ambition; each section has a definite task. It's an arcade-style game, perhaps not the type of experience many Lionhead devotees will be expecting, but one they will probably enjoy. *BC* has special moves. Yes, special moves.

Creature feature

Black & White 2's moves are quite special, too. The creatures return, in fewer numbers but with more polygons, greater flexibility, and more animations. Solving *Black & White*'s problems isn't as simple as supersizing everything, though, and while Lionhead can point to the hundreds of thousands of devoted posts on its forums as proof that the game was a hit with a certain demographic, we think it's fair to say that the game was a disappointment to many. This works in the sequel's favour in a couple of ways. Certainly the press coverage hasn't been nearly as fervent as it was for the first game, giving the team at Black & White Studios some room from heaven-sent expectation in which to breathe. And second, the criticisms of the first have pointed the developers towards areas they need to address in the second game.

The key one of these, we think, is the motivation to progress. Lionhead's studies of *Black & White* players found that players hated leaving the world they'd spent so long building up. Many of them just wouldn't, preferring to potter around on the first level rather than make the rip-it-up-and-start-again transition to the next island. In *Black & White 2*, all the levels exist and develop concurrently, and players can switch between them at will. Islands are no longer disposable once their objectives have been met, and that gives permanent reward to those who treat their homes with respect.

More crucial than that is the manner in which the game changes to suit players who







approach it with different ambitions. *Black & White 2* takes place in a more warlike time than its forefather. Like *Fable*, the situation the player finds offers a stark, two-way contrast: they exist in the world to promote peace, or they exist to go to war. If cities are attractive places to live, villagers from opponents' lands will come and set up home there (essentially a good thing, since more people means more power; but take too many people without the resources to provide for them, and your town runs the risk of developing ghetto settlements). If players choose to take this passive approach to conquering the world, enemies will come to them and attack first, rather than sitting in their settlements in a pretty green stalemate.

If gamers can play *Black & White* as eithe the attacker or the besieged (or alternate between the two on a military whim), then Lionhead has to make the art of defending and attacking cities something entertaining. Much of this appears to rely on walls. Walls can be sketched in any shape, to any width and height around your city. They can be destroyed by tumbling boulders, and smash in organic fashion into splinters of masonry. We get to watch one of Black & White Studios' demolition experts demo the code that handles this. He smashes a plinth of unspecified material over and over, and each time it splinters in a slightly different way. The pieces tumble naturally on to each other. Black & White Studios head Jonty Barnes coaxes a volcano out of the ground near an













Above: *Unity*, Jeff Minter's swirling shooter. It should be noted that 'arsebiscuits!' and (not pictured) 'otter spunk' are just placeholder graphics. Left: caveman simulator *BC*. Far left: hanging around in *The Movies*

opponent's city, then points out the lava following gravity and dripping down the valley, completely naturally, towards the enemy fortifications. And, completely naturally, it cools halfway there, slowing and solidifying – so, completely supernaturally, Barnes creates a fireball and fires it on to the hillside. The lava starts to flow again. Really good physics work here in your favour.

Will all this be enough to make *Black & White 2* the game *Black & White* might have been? Possibly. The problem with this type of game is that love only reveals itself over a prolonged period. Developers are too close to the project, testers look at the brush strokes rather than the painting, and game reviewers are forced to opine long before they're qualified to. Lionhead places great trust in its internet community, and it's that community that's steered the direction of the company's flagship product and will also decide the game's success or failure.

Family film fun

The Movies' appeal seems to be much broader. It isn't of much surprise when Molyneux casually alludes to a mission pack, because the simple truth is that it should be Activision's answer to *The Sims*: a big, universal franchise with ludicrously mass appeal and regular, modular updates. There is nothing to stop this game from reaching the gamers who don't game, aside from publishing timidity. The three elements that make it are so easily grasped – build a movie studio up, look after your stars, make movies – that it is still a surprise to us that no one has done it properly before.

Lionhead is trying to do it properly now, for sure. For a simple game, the technology involved is awfully complex. For a start, the physics engine that is present in *Black & White 2* and *BC* (and that Molyneux says he'd truly love to have implemented in *Fable*, but for fear of feature creep) is also used to good effect here, allowing characters to properly interact with objects dropped on set. If a bucket of water is placed on top of a door, it will fall when the lead actor enters, to understandable comic effect.

Capture that on film, and you have the beginings of hilarity. Add a perfect script and a decent leading lady and you're on your way to your first box office million.

That is the creative part. The traditional game part is resource management, just like *Theme Park* or *Dungeon Keeper* or any number of balancing acts before it. Prima donnas assure some box office success, but suck up money like drunken whirlwinds. Unknowns are cheap, but putting them in a leading role is risky. Doing a film where the bad guys win during World War II isn't a good idea. Likewise, filming filth in the 1920s is likely to leave your studio's reputation in tatters. They are all real-world rules, based on common sense, and combing that with the populist celeb frenzy (and the game's new multiformat status) means *The Movies* has the potential to provide Lionhead with its biggest commercial success to date.

"Unity is like a super-pretty martial artist at the moment – it looks beautiful, it has so much potential, it has all the moves but lacks the punch"

Which brings us to Unity

Viewed on a big screen back inside Lionhead's boardroom, accompanied by Molyneux and a young mystery guest who will apparently play some unspecified part in the future of Lionhead, we hear of *Unity*. We hear of *Unity*'s guiding principle, the unification of light and sound and the player. We hear of the way in which this will work outside of that woollen (but tempting) idea. We hear that the game will not just take place inside the tunnels that screenshots thus far have shown, but in open areas that link the levels together.

We do not hear much more about the game, because in truth that is the element that Minter is only starting to put in as you read this. *Unity* is like a super-pretty martial artist at the moment – it looks beautiful, it has so much potential, it has all the moves, but it lacks the punch. It just sits there and smiles at you, when all you want is for it to fight back. When the aggression is dropped in, and when the shots drop alongside the beats, the screen lights up to please you.

We also hear of the name behind the soundtrack, which is still under NDA, but which will be perfect. We hear how the audio side will work; that it will not be the sound of techno-explosions locking to the beats, like *Rez*, or even the more sophisticated drop-ins of *Frequency*, but something much more freeform. That area, the music technology, is the only place Lionhead is getting involved. The rest is Minter. And we do not need to be told that the game *is* Minter, as that has been obvious from the start.

So, one for the maths students: given its lack of physics engine, emphasis on abstraction and niche gameplay on a suffering platform, how many units can *Unity* expect to shift? The equation is complex, but we hope it works out for Lionhead and Minter and that the game ends up meeting its fearsome expectations. It's a big year for Lionhead, and this is just a part of it, and as the *Unity* producer explains how hard it is talking us through the hypnotic visuals because you find your attention wandering we feel this doesn't matter, because while Molyneux talks a good game, Lionhead has the potential to make better ones. Today's about them, or our impressions of them. And great expectations.

Playing it by the book

Let us take you by the hand and lead you through the streets and dungeons. We'll show you something to help you change your mind about strategy guides



Videogames can be, and invariably are, complex and hard to master. They can be inordinately large, unforgiving, and even wilfully awkward. Who among **Edge**'s readership has not found themselves unable to discern the particular flavour of a designer's puzzle logic in an adventure or RPG title, necessitating moments, minutes, hours of frustrating re-exploration?

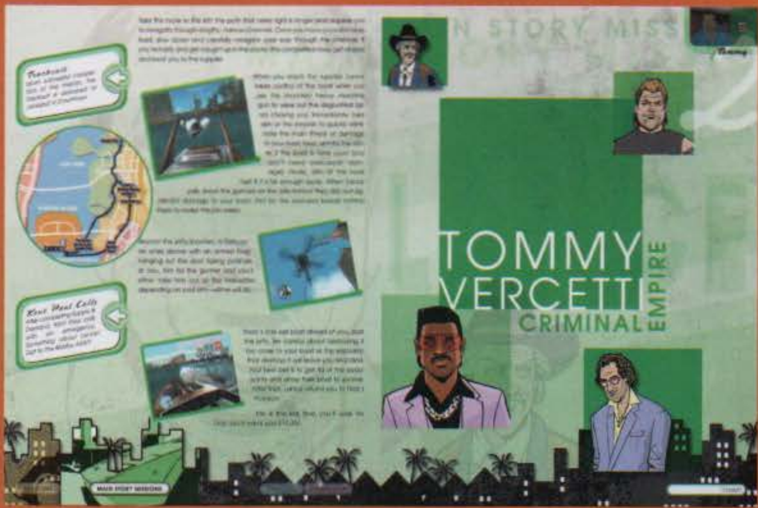
Of course, for a certain cadre of hobbyist gamers, listlessly wandering around an otherwise thoughtfully arranged sandbox for a missing clue is somehow a badge of honour – to gladly endure such experiences is indicative of your gaming nous and, as has often been opined, 'getting your money's worth'. After all, unless you find everything yourself and endure every awkward moment, what is the point of playing? Millions disagree. Eschewing such demi-masochism, they buy strategy guides instead.

Purists may (and indeed will) sneer, but strategy guides are big business for a multitude of salient reasons. The relative complexity of videogames has increased exponentially since the 8bit era. While, for example, C64 and Amiga games could be abstract in presentation and almost obtuse in terms of design, they were also comparatively short and bereft of incidental detail. A solution for a title like *Fairlight* (see The Making Of, p112) could be related comfortably within a few pages of a magazine tips section. An



The Piggyback production team (from left): Carsten Ostermann, Katja Hamann, Martin C Schneider, Nathali Schrader, Klaus D Hartwig

BradyGames' approach is direct, as illustrated by its guides to *GTA: Vice City* and *Max Payne 2*





authoritative, exhaustive, approachable and attractive *Final Fantasy X* guide, by contrast, can barely be shoehorned into a 200-page tome.

Although game magazines and even individual software houses had previously published dedicated solution books, the modern-day strategy guide market was – most agree – sired in 1990 by Prima Publishing with its 'Secrets of the Games' imprint. Since then, an almost symbiotic relationship between guide and game has evolved. For software houses (and, occasionally, for savvy developers), these guides represent another important revenue stream.

For publishers such as BradyGames (established in November 1993 with the 'Mortal Kombat Kompanion'), European-focused publisher Piggyback, and Prima (which made its debut with 'Nintendo Game Secrets' in 1990), the financial rewards as gaming has reached a wider audience have been considerable.

When asked to provide individual sales figures in a hugely competitive marketplace, the aforementioned publishers are reluctant to speak of specifics. Nonetheless, Prima tells of at least eight titles (including guides for *Madden NFL 2004* and *Medal Of Honor: Rising Sun*) that topped 100,000 units in the US during 2003. BradyGames speaks of *Final Fantasy VII*, with over a million units sold to date and currently being reprinted. Piggyback talks of its confident forecast to sell over one million guides across Europe this year. It's a bigger business than many realise. But why?

Market forces

We meet **Louie Beatty**, co-founder of Piggyback Interactive Limited, to garner a greater understanding of the game guide market. Established in 1998, Piggyback was first envisaged by Beatty and partner Vincent Pargney as a European 'solution' for Japanese publishers.

Originally, their remit also included actual software – "We published a game that got slated by **Edge**," Beatty admits with a laugh – but, following three guides, the firm focused purely on the solution business. Piggyback's first book was a PAL region-specific guide for *Metal Gear Solid*. Konami saw fit, apropos of Beatty and Pargney's ambitious pitch, to allow the embryonic outfit to produce a guide for Hideo Kojima's hotly tipped stealth-action adventure.

Fast-forward six years, and Piggyback's reputation as a producer of high-quality guides is simply peerless. With each guide taking over half a year to produce, its books are the most distinctive in the business. These are coffee table pieces – it's not just that they look good, they feel good too. Utilising a sheet-fed printing system (rather than the web offset technique used on magazines and other guides) and an appreciably higher standard of paper, they're a pleasure to hold and behold. With their writers working to much more generous deadlines than BradyGames or Prima writers can hope for, they're also defined by high editorial standards.

Piggyback's business model means that the company has little margin for error. "We've got to finance them for six to eight months, and the production costs are enormous," admits Beatty. "The upfront expenditure is very significant and the risk is huge... if we get it wrong, we're pretty far down the river to begin rowing back up. They ask how much a game is going to sell, and we'll say: this much. This has to be reflected in the price of the guarantees and the royalty structure. It's pretty much standard stuff."

How much? Hundreds? Thousands? Hundreds of thousands?

"It depends on the title," replies Beatty, a little reluctantly. "You'd be talking hundreds of thousands. You're talking serious money, but am I discussing euros, dollars or pounds?" he adds with a grin.

Piggyback's company philosophy is unusual: it limits itself to a mere handful of releases per year and – at least at present – in PAL territories alone. With an eye on long-term performance, Beatty and Pargney have limited their outfit's productivity. Quality, not quantity, is their objective. "We've attempted to run two projects simultaneously," reveals Beatty, "and it was too much. It's like a bridge: it can take X number of vehicles a day, and you experiment, and discover when the stress factors become too great. Instead,

"An almost symbiotic relationship between guide and game has evolved. For software houses (and, occasionally, for savvy developers), guides represent another important revenue stream"

we say: this is the level of detail we offer, this is the production quality we can offer. And during that period, we're not going to be doing anything else – because we simply can't do anything else."

Piggyback's editorial and design standards are recognised by both gamers and software houses and the company regularly rejects projects. Such dedication is not without an attendant premium: "Our risk is very high in terms of development costs. If we're carrying 30 people, and an inventory risk because our costs per unit are very high... if we get a licence wrong or our quantities wrong then it could be very damaging."

Historically, editorial standards in guide books have been wildly variable. This is no reflection on the abilities of individual authors. Like other industries involving wordsmiths, there have been (and will be) plenty of low-rent hacks plying their trade. However, the pressure to match the release of a particular game can render high standards prohibitively difficult to maintain. Even the finest hybrid of writer and gamer will struggle to do justice to a *Zelda* game within the space of two weeks.

Beatty is scathing in his appraisal of guides produced almost overnight in order to hit all-important deadlines. "You're taking the piss – you're putting that out to market, and people are going to know, they're going to see. If a guide's produced in ten days, the quality just can't be there. If people see a guide like that, they're going to say: 'I'm not buying this!' If you buy a guide that isn't much better than an FAQ, or the stuff in magazines or even those little books mounted on the cover, then next time you're in the store you're going to think it's not worth it."

Many guides are written by a solitary author, with a little assistance if necessary, while crunch projects can necessitate the creation of a team. Piggyback's nine full-time employees are augmented by a small army of contract staff as each



Strategy guide covers often re-use a game's box art in order to raise brand association



Piggyback project director Nathali Schrader

The worst-case scenario

A game guide is notoriously time-consuming to write at the best of times. When the particular software it is based on is huge, buggy or late, however, it can reduce even the most seasoned professional to the verge of a nervous breakdown. We spoke to an experienced writer who has lived through a worst-case scenario. Due to non-disclosure agreements – and, of course, professional courtesy – names of those involved have been removed.

How bad was your experience with a strategy guide?
It was a very deep and lengthy type of game, so I was prepared for a substantial workload. I also assumed we'd have someone at the developer's end to provide us with everything we'd need. Never, ever, assume. An international telephone number for the voicemail of a producer who's switched off his phone because he's deep in crunch-time does not a liaison make.

If you've ever had to wait for a patch, then you'll know how unreliable some code can be, so imagine getting it before QA. We obviously anticipated technical problems, after years of first-hand gaming trauma, and yet we still entertained this naïve hope that the game would run on at least one of our machines. Again, never assume. Some problems just go with the territory of dealing with stressed-out dev staff: when long-requested data files finally arrived, we found they had been encrypted in a totally obscure compression format because the programmer had a moral objection to Zip.

How long did you work on it in total? Were you able to do other work during that time? And how much were you paid?
We originally planned for about two months of full-time work, which was to include significant playthrough and screen-capture time while simultaneously turning out a word count to rival a first novel. We knew it was going to be tough, no question, and we were all accustomed to tight deadlines. What we didn't take into account was the extent to which the game was unfinished and still under development. Whenever we finished a section, a new version of the code would appear without any announcement, rendering all of our previous work (and our savepoints) redundant. And so our project started to slip with theirs. Learning to work without sleep for weeks was easy: I just reminded myself that I'd agreed to a fixed lump sum payment, whereupon I'd be kicking myself until I was alert again.

How many different versions of the code were you sent during the guide's development? And were you happy that the final guide was accurate?
The game continued in development well after the print deadline of the guide, so there's no way it can be either accurate or comprehensive. To this day I still cannot bring myself to look at either the published guide or the game I used to enjoy playing.

Would you ever write a strategy guide again?
Of course. Obstinate fools are the mainstay of the entire industry. After my bad experience I'd insist on so many conditions and clauses regarding payment and overtime that any publisher would inevitably employ some fresh-faced innocent instead. These days I prefer to contribute free material to CJayC's www.gamefaqs.com, in my own time. It's my way of atoning.

Do print-based strategy guides have a future?
In their favour, they have all the persistent storage advantages of books and magazines – portability, instant random access, zero power consumption – when you're sitting in front of a TV or monitor. And unlike most FAQs, they're written in English. I'm fully in agreement with the T-Rex in 'Toy Story 2': no game should *need* a strategy guide, or it smells of a conspiratorial commercial rip-off. In the future, I think the strategy guide will need to incorporate all sorts of extras as well as high production values – designer interviews, background info, concept art – to become the kind of gaming accompaniment hobbyists crave. Remembering when games used to come with posters, overlays, stickers, novellas, music and other gorgeously tangible fetishes, I think there could still be a place for that as we head towards digital distribution.



Piggyback publisher Vincent Pargney

project evolves. The company also faces the challenge of working with a number of different languages. "Each guide can be written by two or three authors," explains Beatty. "Then we have translators who have a semi-author function as well, in terms of quality control, and then for each language version there is an editor."

Piggyback's designers are not divorced from the editorial process. "They play the game, they are games players," states Beatty. "That's obviously an element that is very important, but what we also do is have our authors go through the entire game with a video-capture system. So in *Zelda*, when you, say, get the Deku leaf, jump up on to a branch, then glide down to a certain point, our designers can actually see that. We provide each of our editors and translators with that material. It's part of the quality-control process that they can watch and maybe say: 'Uh-uh, that bit's wrong,' if there are errors – and there will be errors first time around.

"The writing can take around six to eight weeks," Beatty continues. "And then it goes into translation, goes into layout, then it's going into proof-reading. We have an editor that goes through all the text to ensure it's all correct. They also go to the publisher, the licensor, for quality control. It's been a real learning curve working with Japanese companies – they ask a lot, but they give a lot."

Guide evolution

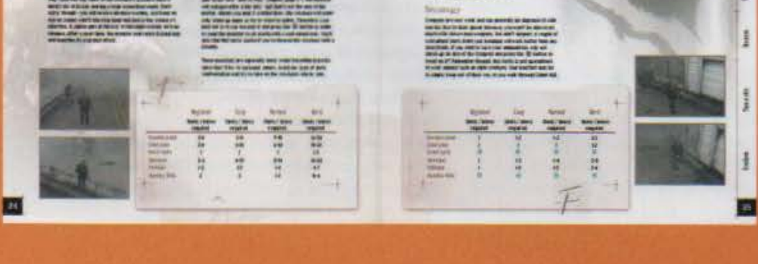
By contrast, Prima and BradyGames work in greater volumes and with much shorter timeframes. Prima, in particular, has produced over 1,100 books – 90 million in print, it claims – during its 14-year history. While its guides are admirable in many respects, and are steadily evolving, with developer interviews and assorted fanboy pleasing extras, its priorities are very different to those of Piggyback. "Prima publishes over 140 guides a year, by far the most in the industry," says **Andy Rolleri**, marketing manager for Prima. "This gives us an advantage, in that we are not so dependent on one game doing well, and we're not at risk if a game flops or moves out of a particular year."

By working – bar two exceptions – with Japanese software houses for its 20 guides to date, and taking advantage of the additional delay before European release, Piggyback's authors have advantages over their peers at rival guide publishers. They are also blessed with the luxury of dealing with established and highly efficient entities such as Nintendo, Square-Enix and Konami.

While speaking to handful of former guide writers for this feature, a recurring comment was that western software houses (and, through deadline stress, codeshops) can be alarmingly blasé about the so-called 'partnership.' 'Half-arsed' was a descriptive term used on more than one occasion, and not entirely unkindly.

"You ask for materials, and you agree the materials, and they are delivered," says Beatty of the companies he has worked with to date. "And it's boundless – the amount of preparation that goes into getting that material and providing it. The reciprocal side of that is that when they receive material from you they expect it to be the same way. They're very, very demanding, in terms of their content and quality, but their comments are 99 per cent correct – when they say: 'That would

Piggyback's official *Silent Hill 2* guide uses Konami's art and its own treatments to strong effect







The cheats' way of saving hours of trial and error, or vital companion piece? You decide

be better for the game' or 'That would be better for the guide,' they're right." Beatty gestures towards the Piggyback *Final Fantasy X-2* guide. "This is 100 per cent of the game, this is *everything*," he states emphatically. "That's the commitment we made to Square-Enix. They asked us what we would need, and we said: everything. That's what I mean by the 'reciprocal relationship' we have."

In limiting itself to a carefully managed number of guides each year, Piggyback has certain advantages. With up to 150 books each year, Prima has other obstacles to leap. "The major difficulty is time," says **Mario DeGovia**, lead in-house author at Prima. "We'd love to have a month with a fully developed game to work with, but that's hardly ever the case. We've written some books in seven days. We want to use more writers if we have less time. Playing the game itself isn't that difficult – at this point we're all rather good at playing games – rather it's the organisation of information and the typing of manuscripts that really burns the time."

All work, no play?

Truly, playing a game to death with an oppressive deadline can be a soul-crushing, spirit-sapping exercise. There are many guides that run smoothly from start to finish, and console games – due to the QA process with the relevant platform owner – tend to be more reliable than PC titles. It's important to understand just how onerous the task of developing guides can be, though.

"We have to present an enormous amount of information in a logical way, make sure it is relevant, and be precise in our writing so we don't publish phone book-sized tomes," DeGovia elaborates. "For that to happen we have to play the game several times as we work, sometimes repeating a level or a fight half a dozen times to get everything we need. As you can imagine, this can be time consuming. Our days are long when we're doing a guide – 12 to 14 hours a day, six to seven days a week is common."

Leigh Davis, editor-in-chief at BradyGames, concurs that guide writing can be daunting: "Well, let me put it this way: before working for BradyGames I edited computer books, and based on my experience I think writing a strategy guide is harder than writing a computer book. When you write about a computer program, you usually know which features will be in the program and how long the book will be. When you write a strategy guide, you have no way of knowing how long it will take you to get through the game, much less how long the book will be. No one knows how long it will take, which really adds to the pressure."

At the turn of the century, many were inclined to forecast that widespread domestic internet access would severely damage the profitability of the strategy guide market. After all, as the argument went, if a player wishes to obtain a needed prompt, entire walkthrough or cheat code, why would they opt to pay £10 – a quarter (but often more) of the RRP of the actual game – when CJayC's GameFAQs site can offer a bare-bones equivalent for free?

"People have been asking the same question for ten years," replies Davis. "And you know what? We're selling more strategy guides now than we ever have.



The detail in Piggyback's guides is not restricted to mere aesthetic values. In this *MGS2* guide, the author even offered a complete solution on its unpleasant highest difficulty setting – a noteworthy feat

> "There is something about being able to hold the product – people love having a tangible product that they can refer to whenever they want, right there as they are playing their game"

BradyGames' books are portable, attractive, and well-organised – features you'll never find in FAQs."

"The internet has always, and will continue to be, a challenge for anyone selling strategy content," opines Rolleri. "Our belief, and it is a belief that has been proven by consistent strong sales over the past few years, is that there is still a large population of gamers who want the printed guide. There are several reasons for this. The guide content is official and approved by the game developer or publisher so you know it is good stuff, not always the case when you go online. The guide contains more than just a walkthrough – there is information about the series, interviews with developers, exclusive artwork and tons of other stuff that make it a collectible item and something the consumer wants. And finally, there is something about being able to hold the product – people love having a tangible product that they can refer to when ever they want, right there as they are playing their game."

They both make valid points, of course. The tactile value of a



The official perspective

Mathieu Daujam is currently putting the finishing touches to Piggyback's forthcoming *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* guide, but takes some time out to discuss the process of creating official game guides.

Which strategy guides had you worked on before *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles*?
I've worked on many guides, but previously mainly as a language editor. Among others, there's been *Metal Gear Solid 2*, *Final Fantasy X*, *Kingdom Hearts*, *The Legend Of Zelda: The Wind Waker* and *Final Fantasy X-2*.

How long have you been into gaming?
Many, many years. I started when I was a kid, got into them big time in my teens and I'm still going strong…

Presumably you've had editorial assistance on the *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* guide. How does that kind of thing work?
I did have assistance, of course. Less in terms of game content and more for technical issues: defining layout instructions, guidelines for screenshots, general structural elements. The support of the project director on all of these points was invaluable. In addition, the publication directors granted me a free hand with regards to the structure and the contents of the guide. The creative freedom was thrilling. It really gave me the opportunity to think the project through as a whole.

How long did you work on the *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* guide in total?
This project timing was really tight. A normal Piggyback guide will take anything from three to six months depending on the size of the game. However, with *Crystal Chronicles*, I only had two months to write the concept and texts for the guide. How do you manage to make three months fit in two? By working 12 hours a day instead of eight! This doesn't take into consideration time for the layout, language editing and production teams.

How difficult was it to write and research?
Overall, everything went smoothly. The better you know the game, the easier the writing process. In this case, I had played the game for over two months before the guide project even started: this allowed me to define a very clear and detailed guide concept. All I had to do afterwards was to follow my framework. The main difficulty was integrating certain improvements I hadn't thought of initially. That's part of the creative process. Integrating those elements in a logical and natural way was probably the most challenging facet of the job.

How many hours do you think you've spent playing *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* while putting together the guide?
Countless hours. We are talking many months. I can't imagine how many hours it amounts to. Actually, I'm not sure I want to know…

Do you have to take your own screenshots?
Since time was short, I got support from one of the *FFX-2* authors to do the screenshots. This enabled me to focus on my creative writing. The total number of screenshots was enormous, not only because I structured the guide with a high number of screenshots in mind, but also because many featured on-screen text. This of course necessitates taking each screenshot several times (for each language in which the guide is published).

Presumably you had an English version of *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* from the very start.
Yes, I did.

What assistance have you had from the developers at Square-Enix, apart from screenshots?
The support provided by Square-Enix is very valuable. They made a lot of information available (in particular the game's secrets). In addition, they always gave us swift and reliable answers for any sporadic questions we came up with.

What sort of problems did you experience while writing the guide?
The main difficulty you meet when creating a guide in Europe is that the book is published in several countries, hence in different language versions. This needs to be carefully integrated into the master guide concept to ensure that each language version is optimised.

What are your thoughts on the finished article? Which elements worked out most effectively?
I am happy with the final product in terms of textual content, but let's wait to see it in laid-out form and printed. What I'm most pleased with on a personal level is the six-page interpretation of the game's scenario that I wrote at the end of the secrets chapter. It's an in-depth, freely inspired analysis of the game's plot that follows different reading 'paths' – in other words, it explores the game's scenario through the prism of several key events or characters. It's a unique recipe, offering a glass of story recapitulation, a spoonful of philosophy and a pinch of personal composition.

How labour-intensive is the process of writing game guides nowadays?
Writing a guide is very intense. The most energy-demanding phase for me was the guide concept, and then sticking to the originally defined architecture. If you have a good structure from the very beginning, and if you make the effort to direct the entire writing process to the sense of the original structure, you end up with a result that oscillates somewhere between a book and a guide. The idea is to create more than a mere 'solution' for a specific game. The goal is to ensure, as much as possible, that you get a book with a life of its own.

Given the increase in domestic internet access in recent years, are you surprised that the game guide market remains relatively healthy – especially when players stuck at point X in game Y can simply check free sites like GameFAQs for tip Z?
Not really. What you find on the internet is helpful if you're stuck in a game, if you can't beat a boss or solve a puzzle. But this is not really what Piggyback's guides aim at, at least not only that. Enabling the reader to finish the game is just the tip of the iceberg. Say you go hiking in the French Alps and you take a guide with you: you don't only expect the guide to get you back to your car safely. Ideally, you'd like him to show you the prettiest forests, the most beautiful lakes and the tallest peaks, while still walking on a passable path.

It's not that different with a videogame guide: it should broaden your experience, optimise the way you play and analyse the keys of the game's system. It should make the game talk to you.

What's been the most difficult project you've worked on at Piggyback?
The last two projects I would say, maybe because with each project we are trying to do more. *Final Fantasy X-2* because it's a game that literally bursts with secrets and that can be played in so many different ways. *Final Fantasy Crystal Chronicles* is different because it's a console RPG with no equivalent: you can play alone or with friends, you can go anywhere on the world map at any time, finish any dungeon whenever you feel like it, and every single one of your choices has direct consequences on your adventure.

well-designed guide should not be underestimated. There's also the simple issue that with many genres, particularly RPGs, software houses are not necessarily competing for access to wallets, but for a player's time. There are only so many hours that can be dedicated to playing games. To dedicate a minimum of 40 hours of your life to complete a *Final Fantasy* instalment is a huge commitment. That's 80 episodes of 'EastEnders', approximately 26 films, ten large nights out. Having a guide at hand can help players explore and enjoy a particular game, minimising instances of time-consuming trial-and-error or frustrating loss of direction. "That is so key, and it's going to be more and more the case," agrees Beatty. "Look at the size of games. Look what's coming up: some mammoth, mammoth games in terms of choices, in terms of content. We think the market is going to become more hit-driven, but more in terms of quality than on the licensing side. Games are going to become bigger and more complex, and if that's the case, people are going to need guides."

In it for the money

Which brings us, neatly, to a related issue: do software houses insert seemingly insurmountable obstacles in games with strategy guide sales in mind? The 'trials' in *Final Fantasy X*, for example, are labour intensive, narrative-free and potentially lengthy exercises in trial-and-error use of switches, keys and objects. They either represent puzzle design at its most bloody-minded or a prompt by a clever publisher to invest in an official solution. With a bottom line to consider, how many videogame publishers have not at least considered this ploy?

"I worked on a strategy guide for a title where the software house in question, who shall remain nameless, was operating premium-rate 'cheat' lines," a former

Prima's guide to *The Return Of The King* is mostly walkthrough, but it details the game's secrets



Does a game such as *Sonic Heroes* really need an in-depth guide? Prima evidently thinks so



"I think there will be a merging of electronic technology and printed strategy guides in the future... guides in DVD form will complement, not replace, the existing printed strategy guides."

guide writer confides. "There were perhaps a dozen codes that allowed access to new features, generally standard fare, but a few of them were actually quite desirable. To prevent game magazines or tips sites from simply printing these codes, the company had devised a password system. After a day of strenuous debate, we were permitted to print a handful of these, heh, cheats in the official, supposedly comprehensive guide – just above a huge phone number for their expensive automated lines, in fact."

Such schemes (cynical profiteering, some would say) are rare. However, with the advent of broadband-enabled consoles, the potential for 'tips on demand' delivered for a small charge as players find themselves stuck in game X is hardly far-fetched. Guide publishers have survived the arrival of domestic internet access with their bottom lines intact, but the future contains further hurdles, particularly digital delivery of software – and perhaps, in time, the breaking of the bond between gamer and high street stores.

The guide publishers are not oblivious to such eventualities. "I think there will be a merging of electronic technology and printed strategy guides in the future," speculates Davis, "which is why BradyGames plans to create several strategy guides in DVD form. These will complement, not replace, the existing printed strategy guides."

At their best, strategy guides can be more than simple walkthroughs. They can be companion pieces, combining solutions with behind-the-scenes information and interviews. The best games inspire a completist fervour, a thirst to see everything a game has, even what it might have. Guides should quench that. After all, is content not king? If you want to see every iota of *The Wind Waker*, experience everything it has to offer without hours of backtracking on top of that already present, there's no shame in reaching for a printed solution. It's not as if you have to admit to it...



Kingdom Hearts: a rare disappointment for Piggyback, due to low European game sales



From left: Piggyback publisher Vincent Pargney, quality controller Carsten Ostermann and marketing executive Katja Hamann

The world's most respected videogame reviews

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Every issue, **Edge** evaluates the best, most interesting, hyped, innovative or promising games on a scale of ten, where five naturally represents the middle value. **Edge**'s rating system is fair, progressive and balanced. An average game deserves an average mark – not, as many believe, seven out of ten. Scores broadly correspond to the following sentiments: zero: nothing, one: disastrous, two: appalling, three: severely flawed, four: disappointing, five: average, six: competent, seven: distinguished, eight: excellent, nine: astounding, ten: revolutionary.

Edge's most played

Chrono Cross

It's just not the same, lacking the immediacy and charm that made *Trigger* great. But it does offer narrative intricacy that puts *Deus Ex* to shame.



(PS1) Square

Mojibribon

Forget Lula, this is real one-handed gaming. And with your left hand free for a restorative cup of tea, it's perfect for deadline-week twiddling.



(PS2) SCEI

Final Fantasy X-2

It's an emotional business, re-visiting the sites of epic struggles and immense frustrations, but the dress sphores make everything ever so delightful.



(PS2) Square-Enix

Made In Wario

When clocking up enough air miles to turn your eyes to anchovies, only Wario can see you through. Just don't try to explain it to anyone sitting next to you.



(GBA) Nintendo

Yours truly

Has Sony killed the killer app?

Once upon a time there were exclusive games and multiformat ones, killer apps and volume sellers. Nowadays, it's a muddle of staggered release dates and spin-offs. Is *Pandora Tomorrow* out yet? Maybe. Kinda. Depends. Exclusivity has had a major rethink.

Finally out on GameCube and Xbox, there's no question that *Prince Of Persia: The Sands Of Time*'s brief PS2 exclusivity deal hurt its overall sales. Released in the run up to Christmas, it never stood a chance of making its mark against the festive deluge of PS2 titles. Xbox and GameCube magazines, with less content to pick from, would have given *Persia* far more coverage, resulting in a combined media barrage that would have boosted sales across all platforms. Only Ubisoft and Sony know the details of the deal, of course, and both may have reason to believe that it was a sound financial choice, but it still emphatically dented the game's profile.

For *Ninja Gaiden*, oddly, the opposite is true. Other than the obvious technological advantages, developing the game for Xbox – starved as it is of Japanese AAA titles – gave Team Ninja's project a far higher profile than it ever would have had on PlayStation2.

Sony, having once had to rely so heavily on exclusives, is now so strong that it can afford to let its franchises loose for a profiteering paddle in other manufacturers' markets. Its coup of wooing *Final Fantasy* away from Nintendo, and its later purchase of an 18.6 per cent stake in Square, made it seem certain that *Final Fantasy* would stay exclusive for ever. Now, with PS2's dominance and Square-Enix's cavernous balance sheet, it means it can contemplate letting once jealously-guarded IP out to play. Who's going to shy away from buying a PS2 just because of *Crystal Chronicles*?

It's a similar story with *Metal Gear Solid*. There's no question that Sony has been savvy in controlling the sideline nature of these products. Neither *Crystal Chronicles* nor *Twin Snakes* come close to being 'true' new instalments of the series. With tantalising hints that even the mighty *Dragon Quest* (below) might go multiformat, manufacturers of new hardware may need to come up with a whole new concept of the system seller. Unless, of course, they're sitting on *Halo 3*.













Ninja Gaiden

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Tecmo** Developer: **Team Ninja** Price: **£40** Release: **Out now (Japan, US) April (UK)**



Special attacks, like this decapitation charge, need to be powered up, and the game shows you moving through the manoeuvre with the aid of a sort of time-lapse photography in glowing indigo



The movement is the first thing you'll notice. There's no need to discuss the control scheme, because every button you press will do exactly what you expect it to – or what you would expect it to if you ever stepped out of the flow to bother analysing what you're so instinctively doing. There's none of the Prince of Persia's flamboyance here. Instead Ryu effortlessly executes the same wall springs, back flips and handstands with his own cold, muscular precision. *Gaiden* is built on the same triforce as *Persia* – move, think, fight – but the balance, tone and execution could hardly be more different.

The game's setting is a glorious mishmash, lumping cherry-blossom samurai in with laser-cannon tanks and mystical monsters with thin-lipped men in Humphrey Bogart mackintoshes. The incongruity of the elements makes exploration all the more compelling, since there is genuinely no way of guessing where you'll end up next. It's worthwhile, too, since all sorts of treasures and puzzles are secreted around the vast levels. Your manoeuvrability is key, since many of them will be balanced on drainpipes or hidden over rooftops. The initial inaccessibility of some of these areas will fuel your desire to backtrack, as obtaining the warhammer or the incendiary shurikens will trigger memories of likely-looking cracked walls you bypassed levels ago.





Firstperson view is invaluable for route planning, and also for seeing the sights

"Your repertoire rapidly expands from the slash-block-jump of the opening level to encompass diving decapitations, body slams and fireballs"

These diverse environments, built with the most gleamingly detailed solidity ever coaxed out of the Xbox, aren't empty. Bands of enemies patrol, armed with nunchakus, bazookas and explosive darts, and many will defeat you first time round. However, familiarity will not dull your hunger for the humble brawl. You'll come to develop an enthusiastic affection for the few enemy groups that respawn, experimenting and refining each time you run (or spin or slice or cartwheel) into them. As the game progresses Ryu finds, buys or masters new moves, spells and weapons. Your repertoire rapidly expands from the slash-block-jump of the opening level to encompass diving decapitations, body slams and fireballs. Special attacks, fuelled by globes released b felled opponents, let you stitch together ecstatic attack sequences, blood fountaining as you tumble and twist in mid air.

The camera system provides you with a quick-centre control, which ensures you never stay disoriented for more than a moment. Periodically, however, the camera closes in and limits your viewpoint to a few feet in front and behind. Trying to fight, flip and fend off three fighting and flipping ninjas when your field of vision is so severely reduced becomes a test of how psychic you are about what's happening off screen, not c how well you've honed your skills.

These moments are the exception, however. The rule is that what will defeat you is the smartness of the enemies and slowness of your brain. As the conscious effort to master combos and counters begin

Previously in E112, E125, E130, E133















Magic attacks become increasingly elaborate, buying you time and demolishing roomfuls of enemies. When your gauge runs dry you'll be forced to revert to the basics – slamming opponents into walls

to pay off, your instinctive use of them will give you time to study the moves and tactics of your opponents. Only when knowledge, skill and instinct are working in perfect unity will you be able to triumph. And against *Gaiden*'s spectacular bosses, the challenge is amplified to crushing proportions.

The brutal fact is that a good percentage of *Ninja Gaiden* players will hit an impassable difficulty spike, not five hours or five days into the game, but after around 30 minutes. The first boss ups the ante tenfold from the fights that precede it, and many players will fall and fall and fall again at the arsenic-coated barbed wire of this first fence. Tecmo's refusal to extend any kind of handhold to less dedicated players is simply a failure of design, not a badge of hardcore honour. The sheer quality of *Ninja Gaiden* proves the existence of an immense supply of talent and invention at Tecmo, and it's impossible to believe they couldn't have found a way to increase the accessibility of the game without undermining the gloriously intractable nature of the challenges it contains. A training arena, of the kind common to the 3D fighters that *Ninja Gaiden* draws from, would have provided some respite from repeated defeat and encouraged players to persevere on the hard and rewarding road the game lays out ahead of them.

To applaud *Ninja Gaiden* for being hard is to miss the point – not least because there are portions of the game that aren't. The point is that the fluidity of movement that felt so ground-breaking in *Prince of Persia* only a few months ago is something which *Gaiden* supplies with almost contemptuous ease. The point is the dozens of things that are done so well you don't notice them happening – the perfectly judged auto-aim, the sound design packed with information and atmosphere. The point is that while it could be argued that no game has the right to demand of you what *Gaiden* does, few other games offer such exceptional riches in return.

Edge rating: Nine out of ten

Splinter Cell: Pandora Tomorrow

Format: **PS2, Xbox, GC, PC** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£40** Release: **March 26**





Some of Fisher's new manoeuvres were inspired by the agility of the spy characters in the multiplayer game. Old dog, new tricks





The second coming of splinter cell operative Sam Fisher can generally be regarded as cause for divided celebration. Gamers who thrilled to his covert exploits may take some pleasure in the knowledge that singleplayer *Pandora Tomorrow* falls very much into the 'more of the same' category. While the developers at Ubisoft Annecy have crafted an innovative online experience, their colleagues in Shanghai have produced what can only be considered *Splinter Cell 1.5*.

The team has addressed some of the complaints levelled at the first version, but have missed an opportunity to move the franchise along, or take the singleplayer game dynamic to another level. Indeed, this latest offering still falls foul of many of the same annoyances levelled at its predecessor – small niggles that, when compounded by repeat play, go a long way to spoiling the overall package – but more on these later.

After his last mission deep into the post-Soviet Union state of Georgia, Fisher's new mission takes him on the globe-trotting trail of a far-eastern terrorist organisation, from the US Embassy in Jakarta via Paris, Jerusalem and even Los Angeles international airport before heading back into the depths of Indonesia. As such, the locations are slightly more varied than before, including some lush jungle sections and a high-speed clandestine operation aboard the Nice-to-Paris TGV. The levels are also more expansive, as particularly evidenced by a night-time excursion through the sprawling streets of Jerusalem.

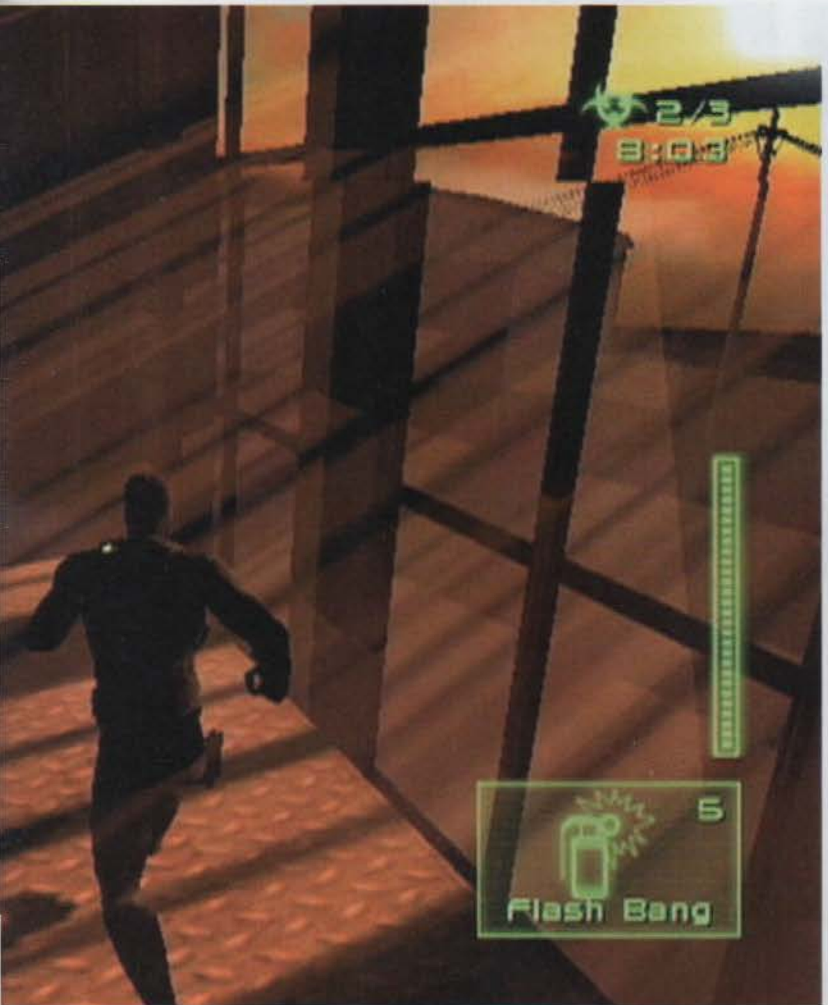
As with the original *Splinter Cell*, *Pandora Tomorrow* plays much like a puzzle game, in which sections between save points throw up a variety of set-piece situations to be overcome. Do you knock out the patrolling guard and sneak past his two colleagues? Throw a bottle to divert their attention? Or simply incapacitate them all with your sniper rifle? There's a degree of freedom in the choices open to you, though the game is obliged to guide you along a linear path, where your route is generally clear cut. This isn't necessarily a bad thing: on the few occasions where your next move is unclear – an overhead hatchway goes unnoticed, for example – it's all too easy to end up furtively retracing your steps in an attempt to make some progress.

As you might get stuck on a tricky puzzle stage, so too can you get bogged down on areas in *Pandora Tomorrow*. This is where the game can rapidly descend from highly strung seat-of-the-pants action into Pavlovian repetition, and is exacerbated by those stages which include set-piece dialogue, either with other characters or you[r] HQ. You can at least fast-forward through most of the 'live' dialogue, but briefings still can't be bypassed – an unnecessary contravention of the First Law of Gaming.

As mentioned, the ingenious multiplayer setup, which pitches thirdperson spies against firstperson gun-toting mercenaries, was developed separately from the singleplayer game – and it shows. In place [of] the conservative, mainstream approach, thi[s] is fundamentally a new and demanding game: new controls, new equipment, new objectives, new environments, new

"Do you knock out the guard and sneak past his two colleagues? Throw a bottle to divert their attention? Or simply incapacitate them all?"

Previously in E133











Spy characters are armed with non-lethal stun bullets, which help them outrun mercenaries

characters and endlessly new tactics. As a consequence, it exists as a cat's cradle of gameplay checks and balances, and it's hardly surprising that some of the calibration feels off. For example, tracking devices which allow spy characters to tag mercenaries so they show up on radar don't stay active for long enough to justify the risk in placing them. And close-up combat – though it won't occur that often – is a little clumsy.

More than most traditional multiplayer death matches, *Pandora Tomorrow* comes into its own only after players become intimately familiar with the level architecture. The dense networks of hidden tunnels, zip lines and laser traps make newcomers feel like blundering idiots, and play only becomes truly satisfying when all involved are fully versed in all the tactics, equipment and manoeuvres open to them. It makes assessing the multiplayer game particularly thorny, since the game is undoubtedly at its best when played by committed two-man teams with weeks, if not months, of experience under their belts.

It's impossible to be certain at this stage – before the game officially goes Live – just how much of its enormous potential it will fulfil, but there's no question that this the absolute antithesis of the quick-fix fragfest. This is gaming which prizes skill, knowledge and intelligence not instead of quick reflexes, but alongside them.

Ultimately, *Pandora Tomorrow* is greater than the sum of its parts. It's disappointing that basic irritants are still evident in the singleplayer game, and there are areas which feel vague or unpolished. Despite this, the game still manages to enthral. Sneaking through crowded, dimly lit streets with a 'Lethal Force Not Authorised' sign is guaranteed to send pulses racing. Squatting in a darkened corner, sniper rifle in hand, as a guard strolls blithely past provides a curious mixture of power and vulnerability.

There are few games quite as tense when you trip an unseen alarm and all hell breaks loose. But it's the online version – which takes the hunter/hunted metaphor to chilling extremes – which ends up being one of the most nerve-racking gaming experiences of all time.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten



Alarm clock

The original *Splinter Cell* featured the idea of alarms, where every time Fisher was spotted an alert was raised – three strikes, and you were out. This version takes the idea a stage further with alarm states, where guards reappear kitted out in armour and helmets as the alarm state is raised. You'll still abort the mission if you set off the third alarm, but stay out of sight and the opposition eventually returns to normality. On balance, this feature probably allows you too much freedom, as it's relatively easy to sit in a dark corner for a while.

Far Cry

Format: **PC** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Developer: **Crytek** Price: **£35** Release: **March 26**



Normally, with the obstruction of vision caused by the lay of the land, pop-up is completely unnoticeable. When you take to the air you may see, if you strain, a little towards the horizon







Binoculars feature an audio-detection function, allowing you to eavesdrop on distant enemy conversations

The sea caresses the beaches like a supernaturally attentive lover. The sky is powder-blue, the sea a living mirror and, emerging from it, verdant isle after verdant isle. It's all so perfect it seems a shame to pull the trigger and bring a heaving bag of violence to this unearthly paradise.

It's clear that we're in that stage of the gaming hardware cycle where the PC takes a lead over static platforms. While *Deus Ex: Invisible War* was hamstrung by a somewhat dour graphical aesthetic and a simultaneous Xbox release, *Far Cry* is simply an exercise in what consumer-level graphics can do with the right coding behind it.

Levels are of unprecedented size for a game with these visuals, and swap without effort between outdoor areas and internal tunnels. *Far Cry* is also a posterchild for how the graphics/gameplay dichotomy was always false. In games, technology begets experience. While other titles have created levels of this size – *Project IGI* comes to mind – only now with the ability to graphically portray dense undergrowth could you create a game that presents this experience. In its outdoor environments it apes *Halo*'s freedom to approach any given encounter in your own manner, and then increases it – the environments are so open and free that an individual's approaches will be as distinct as the individual themselves.

The only boundaries are the cliffs and, if you wander too far from the level, the threat of being hunted down by helicopter gunships. It's a far more elegant solution than a simple invisible wall could ever be.

These environments wouldn't be worth anything if *Far Cry* hadn't created some equally sophisticated denizens to inhabit them. Since in an open environment a designer is incapable of dictating which way the opposition will approach (using a brute-force scripting method to create the challenge), they instead rely on AI that is bright and reactive enough to respond to a player's gambits. While occasionally it misfires – normally in a heavy-weapon trooper's over-optimistic belief it can hit something but instead impacting on an intervening object – it's mostly hugely successful. The opposition will, if alerted, stalk you, obey orders from their commanders and even call in reinforcements via helicopter on some levels. Even idle animations rise above the norm. If you find a suitable high point to observe a base you'll

"It apes Halo's freedom… the environments are so open and free that an individual's approaches will be as distinct as the individual themselves"

Previously in E112, E119, E125, E126, E132











With heavier weapons you can shoot down helicopters, but by targeting their gunners you can simply scare them off (top). Alternatively, capturing patrol boats gives you manoeuvrability and power (above)

While wounds are visible as textures on models, extensive *Soldier Of Fortune* gore is generally avoided. This isn't to say that the ragdoll physics can't deliver cringe-inducing violence, however

see that, as well as the expected patrol routes, guards amuse themselves smoking, performing tasks and even fishing. However, upon your first shot, they'll find defensive positions and never return to a casual state.

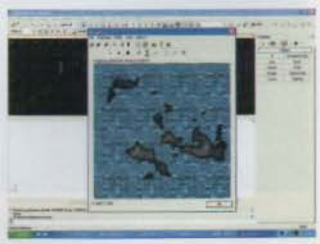
Add a suitable selection of vehicles to explore this terrain and you have something that genuinely is a state-of-the-art firstperson shooter. Wherever Crytek chose to innovate, it was hugely successful. However, the problem is that it wasn't happy creating something new, but insisted on having a go at something old, too.

The theory goes that a firstperson shooter isn't really a firstperson shooter unless it includes monsters out of control, indoor tunnel sections and lots of grey. While far from disastrous, whenever you leave the outside world and enter a catacomb the change in tone – from freedom to linear, from player expression to designer-led challenges – is immediate and somewhat profound.

Having played through horror sections with monsters leaping out when you least expect it in every non-WWII shooter of the last five years, it can be tiresome to go through it again. That said, even here the action occasionally shines, and certain mutants that are capable of bounding from level to level with both speed and precision are highly memorable. It's also telling that the most successful horror levels are the ones that take place in the great outdoors, recalling 'Jurassic Park' and 'Predator' rather than the traditional 'Aliens' and 'The Thing'. It's sad that Crytek was able to see a future for the genre away from second guessing what Valve is aiming at with *Half-life 2* but was incapable of totally relinquishing this.

Only that, and the occasional use of instant death, hold *Far Cry* back from being a true classic of its type. For a new developer to arrive with a game that excels in as many categories as *Far Cry* is a rare thing indeed. This is a uniquely beguiling game, and frequently beautiful in every sense.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten



Jungle out there

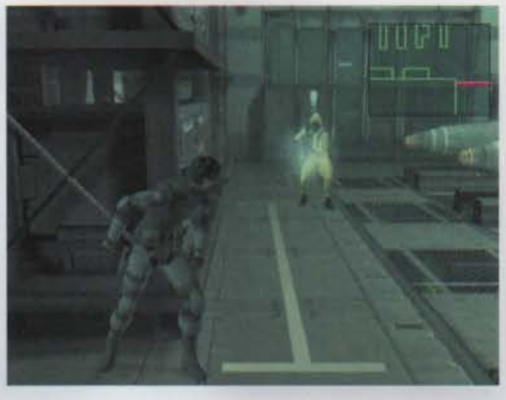
While including mod tools is almost standard practice for PC FPS developers, few have put in the effort that Crytek has with its editor. The beautiful outdoor levels can be relatively easily constructed or automatically generated, and, with its low level of entry, *Far Cry*'s life should be extended by a lively mod scene.

Metal Gear Solid: The Twin Snakes

Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Konami** Developer: **Silicon Knights** Price: **£40** Release: **March 26**

Previously in E12









While essentially the same game, 'bonuses' include a remixed soundtrack, an animated briefing sequence (originally text-only), reworked cinematics, and Easter eggs



Snake in the snow

For those new to the series, the setting for *Twin Snakes* is an Alaskan weapons base now under the control of a terrorist group threatening the US government with a nuclear attack launched using the facility's secret project, Metal Gear Rex. As special operative Solid Snake, your mission is to infiltrate the base and neutralise the terrorists. This involves stealth, but juxtaposed with liberal use of explosives.



It may not offer enough to warrant purchasing if you've already played the original, but *MGS:TTS* is a decent conversion, taking the narrative of *MGS* and mixing in some of its sequel's enhancements

Let's keep things in perspective. It's easy get swallowed up by Konami and Nintendo's promotional drive for this game which, picking up pace from the announcement at last year's E3, has mentioned the names Kojima and Miyamoto at every available opportunity. The reality is that *Twin Snakes* is a straightforward, lightly reworked conversion of the PlayStation's *Metal Gear Solid* (**E**64, 9/10) handled by the studio that brought us *Eternal Darkness*.

The most obvious enhancement is a graphical update, which although hardly spectacular brings the game into line with current standards. In fairness to the developer, a predominantly grey Alaskan secret weapons base was never going to provide exciting textures, but it's nevertheles disappointing to find on occasions a slight lack of detail robbing the game of an additional chance to bolster its real-world looks. More upsetting, however, are the (admittedly few) cases of slowdown.

The narrative itself remains largely unchanged (see 'Snake in the snow'), and although the decision to lengthen the alread generous cut-scenes may deliver the odd treat for *MGS* veterans, many will find their duration exasperating. Crucially, though, som of the reworked sequences end up interferin with the game's pacing while failing to bring anything of substance to the experience.

Of more consequence are the gameplay additions that essentially incorporate those offered in *MGS2*. You get to walk as well as run, forward roll, hang off ledges, fire while crawling, collect dog tags and shoot in firstperson mode, to name the most immediate. None fundamentally alter the game, but the latter is perhaps of most consequence, allowing the administration of headshots – particularly useful for bosses.

In its day, *Metal Gear Solid* set new standards of interaction, introduced a game world of unprecedented realism and wrappe it all up in a (then) fresh cinematic arrangement. Nowadays, most of its memorable elements have been borrowed b others and are now standard issue, making difficult to accurately judge this re-release.

As with the *Resident Evil* re-issues, what Nintendo needs – what the GameCube deserves – is a new *Metal Gear* adventure. I the meantime, anyone not familiar with *MGS* still faces an engrossing and at times thrilling game experience.

Edge rating: Seven out of te

Battlefield: Vietnam

Format: **PC** Publisher: **EA** Developer: **DICE** Price: **£30** Release: **March 19**

Previously in **E**134

"Go home, GI Joe. Your government has betrayed you. They will give you a medal, but only when you're dead. GI, your pilots do not see you. Tonight, your bombers will drop napalm on you while you sleep. Defect. Go home, GI Joe." You're fighting the final offensive on Hue. Bullets are fizzing past your brow, tank rounds flying overhead. From the loudspeakers above your objective bellows the Vietnamese propaganda machine, mocking your efforts. All this from 'just another' firstperson shooter?

The *Battlefield* series is an oddity. Since its release little more than a year ago it has captured the hearts of a different type of online gamer, those who remain uninterested in an emerging clan scene and competitive play. It doesn't matter who you fight for, or who wins. It's about the scale of the battles, watching artillery hitting home while infantry advances. Single players are incidental, it's the 32-player team that matters. *BF:Vietnam* is the next step – EA's production values applied to the multi-vehicle, multiplayer phenomenon.

And when it works, nothing can touch it. The talking point is the helicopters, glimpsed officially in the *Secret Weapons* mission pack and perfected in the *Desert Combat* mod. The *Battlefield* touch – twitchy arcade physics that take two seconds to grasp and two days of solid play to master – are perfectly translated. Your first moments are spent flailing, spiralling out of control. They need the deftest of touches, graceful sweeps of the mouse to bring their armaments to bear.

The levels are dense, claustrophobic affairs – from the evening jaunt through the Ho Chin Min trial, to the sunrise Cambodian Incursion. Urban fighting is terrifying – tanks become vulnerable to hastily arranged ambushes: two troopers carrying RPGs, shuttling around the buildings on the back of a Vespa. You glimpse movement from afar, let off a volley of rounds and move. It feels real. And that's the point. *Vietnam* is not about skill, or proving your worth. It's about taking part in recreations of famous battles, crawling on your belly, loving every minute.

Some will call this a glorified expansion pack, same old ideas, nothing new. The implementation is glorious, a triumph of multiplayer design. Lone players, or those not blessed by broadband should steer clear – *Vietnam* is all about the online play. DICE provide the kit. You provide the heroism. Defect, GI.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten











Although it is possible to play a singleplayer match against bots, their intelligence is suspect. You'll find entire platoons bashing against obstacles rather than going around





Flying over the terrain is liberating – a world away from the battle that rages on below. Helicopters are as fragile as you'd expect, and one hit from a rocket will bring you down

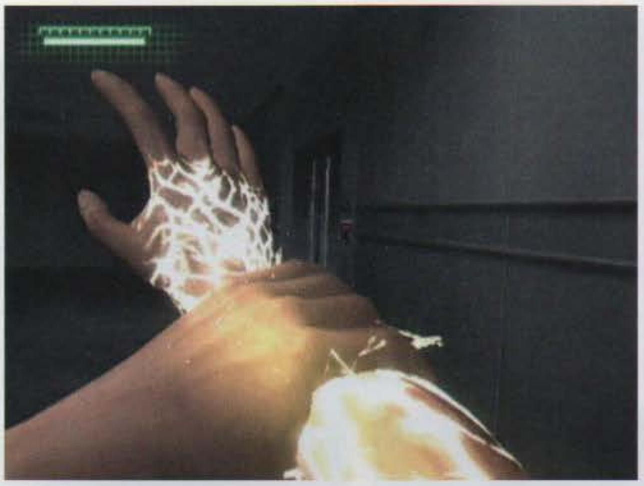


War, huh

In a nod to *GTAIII*, each vehicle is equipped with a radio, from which licensed tracks will be heard by anyone within earshot. Drivers can choose from a 12-song jukebox, which includes a little bit of Wagner for those Air Cavalry moments. If you're willing to sacrifice your platoon's aural experience, you can import your own.

Breakdown

Format: **Xbox** Publisher: **Namco** Developer: **In-house** Price: **¥6,800 (£35)** Release: **Out now (Japan) April (UK)** Previously in **E125**









The outdoor section feels, aptly, like a blast of fresh air after the confines of the research facility, but like most sections of the game you'll be stuck here for too long



Transdimensional kitty

The plot-progressing moments are a bit clumsy, but there are plenty of quirky, well-realised set pieces where holes appear in reality and you step into a disorienting dream-like dimension. These, neatly, are pre-empted by an ethereal blue-and-white cat crossing your path, and make the game more interesting than it deserves to be for its first half.



If there was ever such a thing as a commendable failure, *Breakdown* is it – filled with sound ideas but jarring execution. The fist-fighting becomes so frustrating that it's often best to run past attackers

It's arguable that upping the amount of manual labour in a game can sometimes be a good thing. Having a strong work ethic (as in, say, *Morrowind* or *Shenmue*) can be a way of grounding the player in the game world, of strengthening the illusion through a deliberate use of dullness. Small wonders become greater when they feel like you are getting a reward. Entering a new town in *Morrowind* feels all the more exotic, actual and populated when you've just had to trek across a square mile of wasteland. Of course this idea of flatpack gaming – where the player is rewarded just as much by the DIY a the result – is as fatally boring to some as it is engaging to others.

Breakdown, thanks to its persistence on keeping the player in firstperson for the entirety of the game, comes so very close to hitting the sweet trade-off of increased immersion for increased legwork. The plot is hokum – lifted nearly wholesale from *Half-Life* but made enjoyable by the consistency of the viewpoint. Having to play through cut-scenes is an excellent reinforcement of the game world, and there are plenty of times where you feel embedded: shimmying round the outside of an office block at a dizzying height puking poison out of your mouth or reeling from a rocket blast emphasises your role and relationship with the world around you.

Breakdown is far more cumbersome than it needs to be. Having to hold each piece of ammo up to your face is just one chore too far, for example, but the awkwardness extends into far more important places: fist-fighting is imbalanced to the point of ruin. Against multiple opponents, it's a jagged, unholy mess – against just one opponent, it's a triviality. And navigating the game is a maze of invisible walls leading ultimately to a linear pathway, which is fine if the set-pieces are strong, but they're not. The environments, while large and pocked with some detail, are monotonous and monochrome. Every time the player steps into some new scenery, they'll be kept there for the next hour or so o play. In particular, the last few hours are so identikit – both in terms of location and each particular confrontation – that the grandeur needed to drive the experience is absent.

The result of all this? The sensation that you're playing something with enormous potential. However, those moments where you feel justice being done are few, and a brave mess is still, after all, a mess.

Edge rating: Five out of te

Harvest Moon: It's A Wonderful Life

Format: **GameCube** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Developer: **Natsume** Price: **£40** Release: **March 19** Previously in **E**120, **E**134

The inter-office conversations have already begun. "Have you started gem mining yet?" "Where do you catch the largest fish?" "My pony was taken to the knacker's yard!" Get a couple of years into the latest *Harvest Moon* title and you'll probably be swapping such banter with your friends and colleagues.

At first, *It's A Wonderful Life* seems pedestrian, even by the standards set by the previous games. The premise is familiar: inherit a farm, make a profit, build your business and get hitched to the girl of your dreams. Only this time the emphasis is very much on family affairs and friendship building than raw economics. Indeed, much of the farm work can usually be polished off by lunchtime, leaving you with hours of freedom to explore Forget-Me-Not Valley.

The weird thing about *It's A Wonderful Life* is that it has no point. Sure, there's an implicit understanding that there are girls too woo and children to raise, but much of the enjoyment comes from the awe and wonder at discovering the simple things in the world. Where previous *Harvest Moon* titles encouraged workaholic tendencies – water plants, milk cows, feed chickens ad infinitum – the thrill here is in experimentation. Cooking up new recipes, searching for rare plants, genetically engineering crops, romancing women – what more could you want?

The only drawback is that it occasionally mimics life too closely. The world offers up many opportunities, but there's no narrative direction and 'goals' are vague at the best of times. The inhabitants of Forget-Me-Not Valley are generally warm and welcoming, but their responses to your questions can be vague or nonsensical. Timing is important, and being in the right place at the right moment can reap massive rewards.

To give you some idea of the pace of life, crops harvested in your fields can be sold by opening up a stall by the local inn. And that's what you do all day: stand there waiting for customers to pass by and take an interest in your wares. It's a lethargic but ultimately rewarding universe, and just when you feel your interest waning a new tool, animal or barn extension will offer up further avenues of possibility. If you're the kind of gamer happy to spend a day fishing in the local stream while peripheral events take their course then this will have you hooked for the duration. In short, the game's title does not oversell the experience.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten













You begin the game with a cow, a chicken and a pooch, all of which can be labelled with whatever names you desire. Later, you will receive delivery of a horse enabling you get around more quickly



Initially you must buy seeds, though you can eventually produce your own to cut costs



Dear diary

Presents and interesting recipes will impress most of the girls in the village, but not all. Each has a diary hidden away, and if you sneak a peek it's possible to work out which one has a crush on you. Once the marriage is consummated children appear suddenly and with typical Nintendo avoidance of the mechanics of lovemaking. It's possible to link up to the GBA's *Harvest Moon: Friends Of Mineral Town* to unlock more characters, recipes and music to play on your gramophone, but none of them fundamentally transform the experience.

Metroid Zero Mission

Format: **Game Boy Advance** Publisher: **Nintendo** Developer: **In-house** Price: **£30** Release: **April 30** Previously in **E**125

It's easy to brand *Metroid Zero Mission* as Another Reason Why Nintendo Is Running On The Spot. Taking the visual cues of *Metroid Fusion* and the narrative implications of *Metroid Prime* and then mixing them into the series' progeny sounds like a recipe for disaster. Suspiciously like a dire Hollywood 're-imagining' of an already tried-and-tested film, it could be perceived as a shot fired too close to dull GBA remake territory for comfort.

All *Zero Mission* really does is spruce up the NES original to fit alongside its modern stablemates and give the life of Samus Aran cohesion. The series' hallmarks – complex cascading maps that nevertheless make utter sense, plus the linear yet satisfying system of bolstering power ups – are still present and correct, but are coupled with a graphical overhaul. There is a dramatic shift, but it's not the new visuals – the major change is in the difficulty: *Zero Mission* is easy.

The newer designs, which help this story fit alongside the series' *Super*, *Prime* and *Fusion* instalments, cause the ease. Samus is no longer a bobble-headed blip but a sleek hybrid of flesh and technology who waltzes her way to the plunder. *Zero Mission* causes no revisionist offence, rendering questions of dilution moot points.

It may seem slender, but no game should be chastised for brevity. The core experience of agile exploration remains the same. A neatly added subversive coda (which we won't spoil here) keeps you interested, while Nintendo retains the bulk blueprint of the original, including the iconic attack on Mother Brain. It's just that now it looks better and is thus more thrilling. The fans may balk, so there's material here to satisfy them too, as the game turns out to be deeper than it is wide. Five hours' play can lead you straight to the finale, yet most will find that they have exposed only half of the game's secrets.

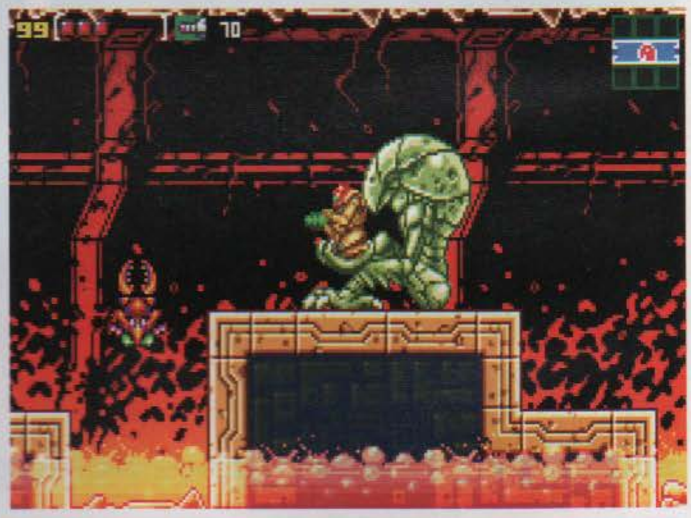
In a climate of other publishers' massmarket ambulance chasing, Nintendo deserves praise for transforming *Metroid* into the accessible *Zero Mission* adventure while retaining the core elements that make one feel adventurous. *Zero Mission* is still old, but it's also tantalisingly new, coupled with a tightening of the mythos and franchise in anticipation of follow-ups to *Prime* and *Fusion*. It works. It's still compelling, despite the unoriginality, making for another irresistible outing.

Edge rating: Eight out of ten



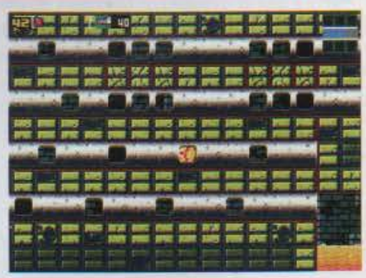








Boss (and mini-boss) battles may be familiar from the original, but there are none of *Fusion*'s Nightmares. The more conspicuous power-ups will ensure you're tough enough to triumph



The game absorbs much from *Metroid Prime*, including mysterious morph ball-powered technology and familiar side-on mazes

.hack//Infection

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Atari** Developer: **Bandai** Price: **£40** Release: **March 26** Previously in **E134**









Data Drain (top left) is your ultimate weapon against the bad guys, de-evolving them so that a Deadly Moth becomes a Cowardly Caterpillar. It must be used wisely, however, for while bonuses abound over-use leads to loss of experience points, or even death

Perhaps it's sociability for the antisocial. Bandai has decided to fake an online game and to d so has taken a basic RPG, bolted on a captivating plot and a lot of ideas, and split it into four.

To discover why your friend is in a coma, you battle monsters across flat fields populated by bizarre sculptures and through simple, level, empty feeling dungeons. Other 'players' make trading requests as well as burbling about curry and, of course, anime – but they don't start conversations and don't take items from treasure chests.

Infection has a repetitive soundtrack and there are prettier things on the shelf, but a neat depth-of field effect blurs distant objects before the draw distance cuts out, and camera control is handled well. What will draw you in is the story, which borrows from anime, 'The Matrix' and real MMORPGs as well as throwing in ideas of its own.

Infection proves that this four-part cross-media project could be good. It gains points for plot and the audacity of simulating an online world, and could have scored higher, but its simplicity and inflexible save system drag it down.

Edge rating: Six out of te

Sabre Wulf

Format: **Game Boy Advance** Publisher: **THQ** Developer: **Rare** Price: **£35** Release: **Out now** Previously in **E134**

To those of us raised on Ultimate's sparkling 8bit computer games of the early to mid '80s, it's hard not to be at least a little gleeful when seeing Sabreman make a reappearance on today's technology. The original *Sabre Wulf* may not have much relevance to today's videogaming, but there were enough ideas in the Ashby de la Zouch company's early work to provide solid foundations for a compelling handheld adventure.

What we end up with is a game of two halves, with only one part of the equation offering any kind of actual challenge. The overground sections are merely filler; it's when you're ensconced in the game's 2D platform levels that it comes to life.

The action here is reminiscent of *The Lost Vikings* in that you make use of variably skilled characters (creatures, in this case) to overcome variously shaped obstacles – some work as platforms to reach higher levels, others destroy anything they encounter, and so on.

It's simple, accessible and ultimately disposable stuff. Not the sprawling adventure you were hoping for, then, but fun nonetheless.

Edge rating: Six out of ten









Reaching the end of each platforming level sees you acquiring a piece of treasure (above) – now all you have to do is retrace your steps while the titular beast gives chase. The graphics have an unusual feel, sometimes bringing to mind Rare's infamous ACM technique

Champions Of Norrath: Realms Of EverQuest

Format: **PlayStation2** Publisher: **Ubisoft** Developer: **Snowblind Studios** Price: **£40** Release: **March 26**

To *Norrath*'s credit, the box blurb makes no mention of a story – those expecting one will be disappointed with the pedestrian plot and its questionable familiarity with the *EverQuest* canon. It's eminently skippable stuff, serving only to bookend Snowblind's real focus: refining the genre it invigorated with *Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance*.

This refinement is evident technically and, more importantly, has a sense of vitality absent from the game's competitors. Up to four players can face a series of mass battles and bombastic set-pieces that only occasionally draw out into grinding slogs. Cooperation comes naturally, be it huddling in the stat-boosting glow of a partner's aura skill, fighting back to back against the odds or cringing behind shields in a hastily decided retreat.

Internet play feels like an afterthought, and the cumbersome *Dark Alliance* save system further complicates matters, but it's in traditional multiplayer (and to some degree singleplayer) where the game shines and attains that perfect shallowness of being both addictive and immediately forgettable – until the next go.

Edge rating: Seven out of ten









The US release was crammed on to a dual-layer DVD, responsible for lock-ups on many capricious PS2s. Ubisoft has returned the game to its original two discs for a less-fraught PAL experience

Pitfall: The Lost Expedition

Format: **PS2 (version tested) Xbox, GC** Publisher: **Activision** Developer: **Edge Of Reality** Price: **£30** Release: **Out now**



Even being eaten by a crocodile (far right) is taken as an opportunity for a little fun. Rotate the stick to open its jaws, then spring away to (relative) safety







First, on the Atari VCS, he was great. Then, on the PlayStation, he was very bad. Now, Pitfall Harry has been cleaned up for a new jaunt. This is your chance to discover what Indiana Jones might have been like had he been a bit, well, slow.

Gameplay is a mixture of open exploration and platform jumping. As the platformer has slowly been bent into a sort of adventure game, it's a pleasant shock to be taken back to a time when missing that jump really did mean you had to start again. Collecting things is kept to a minimum and your quest is tightly packed and varied.

It's Harry who's the star here, his every movement given a joyous bounce or a cheery hop. Watching him swim away from the crocodiles is brilliant – mashing the button makes him flail his arms faster and faster with no noticeable increase in speed. Sight gags like these permeate the whole experience and make for a sometimes captivating adventure. While *Pitfall* lacks the polished game mechanics that could have made it truly great, the characterisation and old school philosophy make it an above-average genre piece.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Haunted Mansion

Format: **PS2 (version tested), Xbox** Publisher: **TDK Mediactive** Developer: **High Voltage Software** Price: **£30** Release: **Out Now**





The creatures that inhabit the mansion do not get more exciting than traditional spiders, skeletons and spooks. Combat, too, is rudimentary: pressing the R1 button zaps some unidentified energy at the ghosts, causing them to recoil and their energy bars to slowly deplete





Fear not, Eddie Murphy is nowhere to be found in a game that takes its thrills from the Disney ride rather than the forthcoming movie. The confusion will probably make hundreds of kids cry, but it seems to have inspired a developer freed from the shackles of conservative Hollywood.

Though its structure owes a debt to *Luigi's Mansion*, there are some unexpectedly fresh ideas. Your mission is to capture souls from every room in the mansion, but each individual location contains a unique puzzle, conundrum or mini-game. From bedrooms containing clever and mysterious moving panels to a 'Land of the Giants'-style pool challenge, each section delivers something new and exciting to motivate deeper exploration.

A Nintendo game containing these concepts would have been covered with plaudits, but ideas only go so far. In terms of graphical fidelity, character control and combat, *Haunted Mansion* is below par. None of this is bad enough to ruin an engaging game, but it takes the sheen off some terrific design. Regardless, it's good to see a platform game that dares to be different.

Edge rating: Six out of ten

Max Payne

Format: **Game Boy Advance** Publisher: **Rockstar** Developer: **Remedy/Mobius** Price: **£30** Release: **Out now**

There are two types of GBA conversion – the cynical cash-ins and the genuine efforts to capture the essence of the original. *Max Payne* falls resolutely into the latter category, although good intentions do not necessarily make a great game.

The view here becomes isometric 3D, and the fixed camera means objects have to become invisible when Payne passes behind. Cleverly, the original's much-copied central conceits – bullet time and shootdodge – are retained (activated by a shoulder button), and when Payne dives across the screen firing twin machine guns it still manages to look cool even on a tiny screen.

With the game's grungy New York reduced to angular tableaux of pawn shops, nightclubs and rooftops, the impact of the bloody PC classic is all but gone. Plus, the visible game area is quite limited – often the first you know about the presence of a bad guy is when he's shooting at you. *Max Payne* isn't a bad way to spend a train journey, but those who've played the original will have little reason to buy the conversion, apart from to smile at how mini-Max so cutely apes his big brother.

Edge rating: Six out of ten









The designers have kept to the structure of the PC original, following it almost blow for blow (apart from edited chapters and plot sequences) from the shot-out police station to Lupino's hotel to the Cold Steel mill and beyond. Even little touches, like the playable drum kit on the nightclub stage, have been included

The making of…

Fairlight

For its creator, proto-RPG Fairlight was an outstanding debut. It was also, unfortunately, quite an extraordinary valediction…

One of the most striking games of its era, *Fairlight* was far ahead of its time. An 'arcade adventure' – as they were then known – it was blessed by some of the most evocative visuals seen on an 8bit system. It offered an experience quite unlike its peers and, on a technical level, experimented with elements of design that would be overlooked or ignored by other programmers for years to come.

What makes *Fairlight* truly noteworthy, though, was that it was creator **Bo Jangeborg**'s first complete game. It was also his last.

Jangeborg's interest in coding was ignited through toying with a Swedish computer, the ZX80-based ABC 80, while at school in Gothenburg. Later, having upgraded to the similarly powered Spectrum, he created The Artist: a graphics package for a format not known for a surfeit of such programs. The utility was powerful, easy to use and, most importantly, sold on the high street. Its £12.99 pricepoint was seemingly extortionate for the time, but did not preclude sales, and its features made it popular on both the amateur and professional Spectrum development scenes.

It's worth dwelling on the story of The Artist for a moment, because without it there would be no *Fairlight*. "It grew from a simple little machine code program that allowed me to set a dot on screen and move it around," Jangeborg explains. "There were lots of little problems such as making a fast flood fill and a fast circle and line drawing function. Fitting all of it into 48K was a bit of a problem, too. It sold well for a tool, but I don't remember the numbers – we are talking 20 years ago, after all."

Before The Artist was released, Jangeborg flew across to London in order to sign a publishing contract and present the completed code to a Covent Garden-based software house named Softek, later re-christened The Edge. During his

Original format: **Sinclair ZX Spectrum**
Publisher: **The Edge**
Developer: **Bo Jangeborg (code, design, graphics), Jack Wilkes (graphics)**
Origin: **UK**
Original release date: **1985**



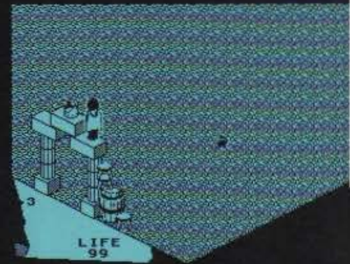
01 These are your first steps in Castle Avars in your quest to free the imprisoned wizard. Collect the scroll, and be careful to avoid the whirlwind



02 Fight the guard – or simply run past him – and enter the castle. Note the crown above the doorway – you'll be returning to collect this in a moment



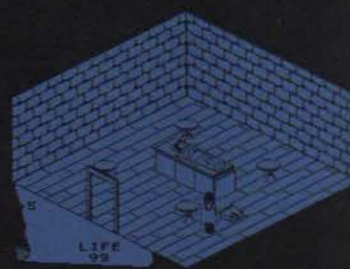
07 Re-enter the castle, then head north, avoiding guards. Enter this room at the far end of the corridor. Collect a barrel, then return to where you left the stools



08 Use the three stools and barrel to climb on top of the doorway. This may require a little patience. Collect the crown – this is an important key



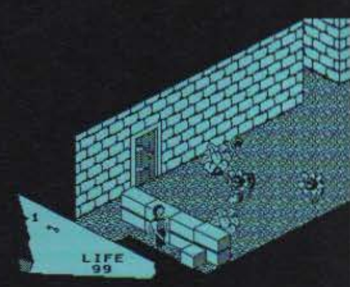
13 Head south and then east until you reach this area. Many get stumped here. There is a secret door in this wall which the crown unlocks. Simply walk through



14 Inside the hidden tomb lies what appears to be the Book of Light. This is a clever decoy. Examine the sarcophagus to reveal an opening. Drop through it



19 Carefully make your way past the first two plants – it's possible to avoid attacks – then use the pot plant to jump on to the raised platform. Collect the hourglass



20 On your way back through the garden, kill the guard and take the key at the bottom of this section. Keep this safe – it allows access to the wizard's tower



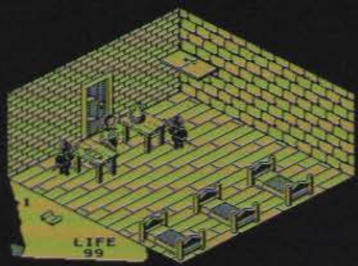
25 The following two rooms are identical. Push a potion into each of the monks to remove them. Collect the barrel and jug in the bottom room, then go back to the top



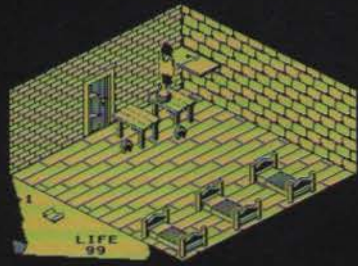
26 Kill both guards, then use the jug and barrel to gain access to the room above via the trapdoor. Have the Book of Light selected in your inventory as you jump through



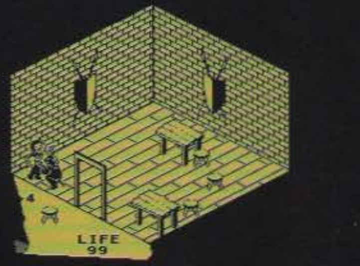
03 Tip: you can prevent guards from reanimating by dropping their helmets into a whirlwind. Ensure that each helmet has disappeared before leaving



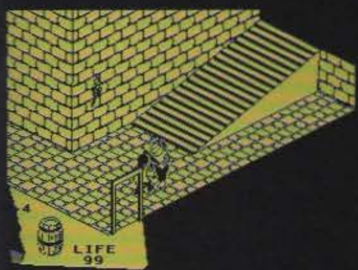
04 Once inside the castle, head one room east, then two rooms north. Dispatch the two guards, but use the furniture wisely to avoid fighting both at once



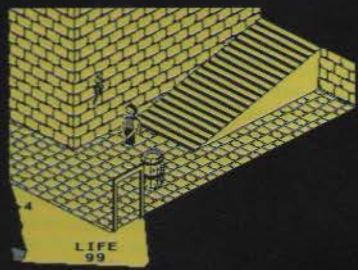
05 Use the furniture to reach the shelf. Collect the key, then return to the corridor. Head south one screen, then use the key to enter the locked door



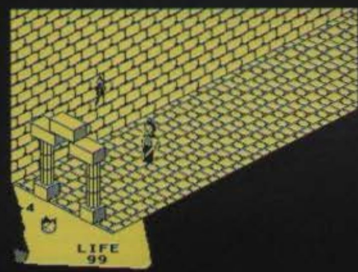
06 Avoid the two bubbles, then run into the room to the north and grab the stools. Take three and drop them outside the main entrance. Two trips are required



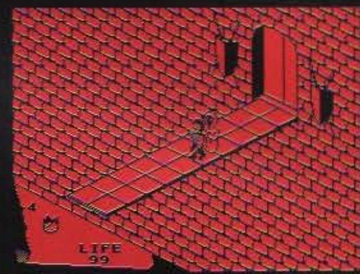
09 Return to the room where you obtained the barrel, collect another barrel – you'll need to drop the crown to do this – then head downstairs. Kill the troll



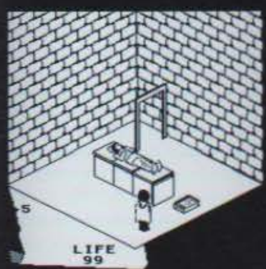
10 Tip: you can prevent trolls from respawning by dropping a barrel at the exact point that you killed them. They will reappear if the barrel is moved



11 Head southeast until you reach this doorway. Run through it, and keep running. Don't stop running under any circumstances, in fact...



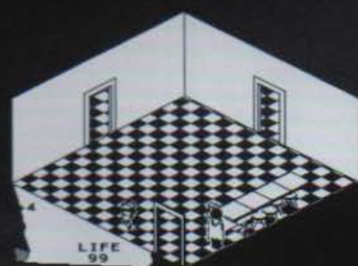
12 The monk will attempt to push you from the bridge. Running past is the easiest option and, for the purposes of this guide, the least time-consuming



15 Collect the real Book of Light. To avoid the perils of facing the monk on the bridge once more, use the scroll to teleport yourself back to the castle courtyard



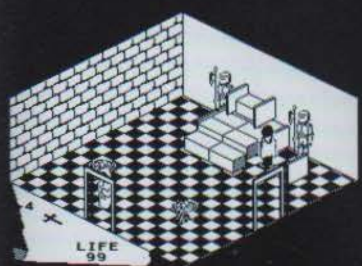
16 Head south through the rooms with chequered floors until you reach a room with a troll. Kill it, collect all the objects you can carry, then return to the room to the north



17 There is a potion hidden tantalisingly out of reach under a platform. Drop non-essential objects, then push them underneath to nudge it through to the other side



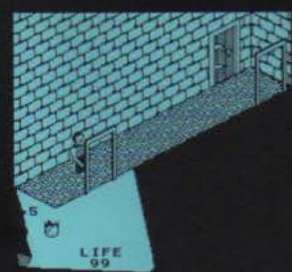
18 Take a pot plant from the room westward, then head towards the area of the garden containing carnivorous plants – it's located to the east



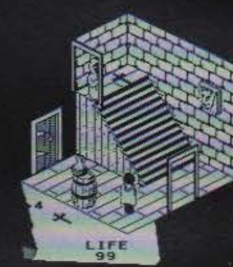
21 Return to the area with chequered floors, and enter the first door to the west. Use the hourglass to freeze time. Examine the throne to reveal a cross. Collect it



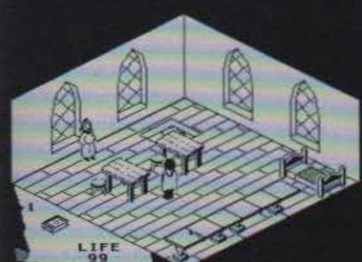
22 Grab a pot plant, then travel back to the lower area of the castle where you first fought a troll. Enter the door found there. Avoid the monk and grab the potion



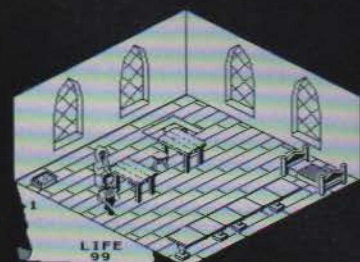
23 With two potions, a cross, the crown and the Book of Light to hand, go to the screen pictured here – it's on the way to the garden – and use the key to enter the tower



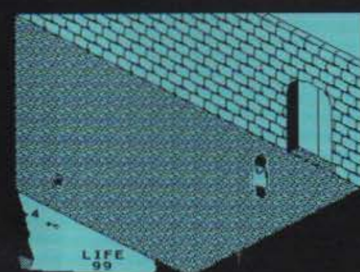
24 Drop the cross on the floor next to the monk blocking the door. Push the cross into it to open the way forward. You're getting close now...



27 You finally get to meet the entrapped wizard – and espy the key to the castle gates. Collect the latter, then drop the Book of Light, and prepare for...



28 ...a twist in the tale: the wizard is actually an evil monk. Jump back through the trapdoor before he can corner you, then head back to the courtyard



29 Leave through this gate to read: 'YOU HAVE SUCCEDED [sic] IN YOUR QUEST THE WIZARD IS FREE THE QUEST CONTINUES IN A TRAIL OF DARKNESS'



30 Tip: when writing what is **Edge**'s first (and last) game walkthrough, it's important to remember to cheat from the outset to avoid frustration. A few POKEs will do the job



This map, with its impressive attention to detail, was originally printed in the fondly remembered 'Your Sinclair' magazine

stay, Jangeborg witnessed a Softek programmer wrestling unsuccessfully with a routine for creating isometric graphics. This was hardly surprising. It was early 1985, and every Spectrum publisher craved a game to rival Ultimate Play The Game's *Knight Lore*. Yet, in terms of technology and talent, most lingered far behind the embryonic Rare.

"I don't think he really knew what he was doing," recalls Jangeborg. He decided to tackle the problem himself, and *Fairlight* was born.

"It grew out from my showing The Edge a little piece of code on how to do isometric 3D while showing them the final copy of The Artist," explains Jangeborg. "They had shown me the problem the day before and were impressed I could show them a working prototype the day afterwards. I started work on *Fairlight* right away, and a one-week visit became seven months."

Look to the future

Living at Softek owner Tim Langdell's house, Jangeborg began work on his first game in an unusual manner for the time: he envisaged a collection of routines that would power not just this game, but future releases in an evolving series. Including code and components developed while working on The Artist, this engine – GRAX, the 'GRA' being an abbreviation of 'graphics', the X an ever-voguish affectation – would allow *Fairlight* to grow up to 80 screens in size.

Compared to Ultimate's *Knight Lore* or *Underwurlde* (which could boast a map comprising hundreds of screens), this number might not have seemed particularly impressive. Jangeborg's game, however, was typified by its more distinctive, tangibly 'worldly' locales. With easy-to-recognise furniture like tables, chairs and beds as well as textured walls and floors – including bricks, soil and wood – *Fairlight* was far less abstract than its peers. *Knight Lore* and its cynically reiterative sequel, the disappointing *Alien 8*, were filled with esoteric objects and devices. Jangeborg could have opted for a similar approach, as developers were inclined to do at the time (and, indeed, still are). He could have chosen to base his isometric adventure on a spaceship, an alien world or those environs so adored by lazy FPS designers: sewers. To his credit, he aspired to more.

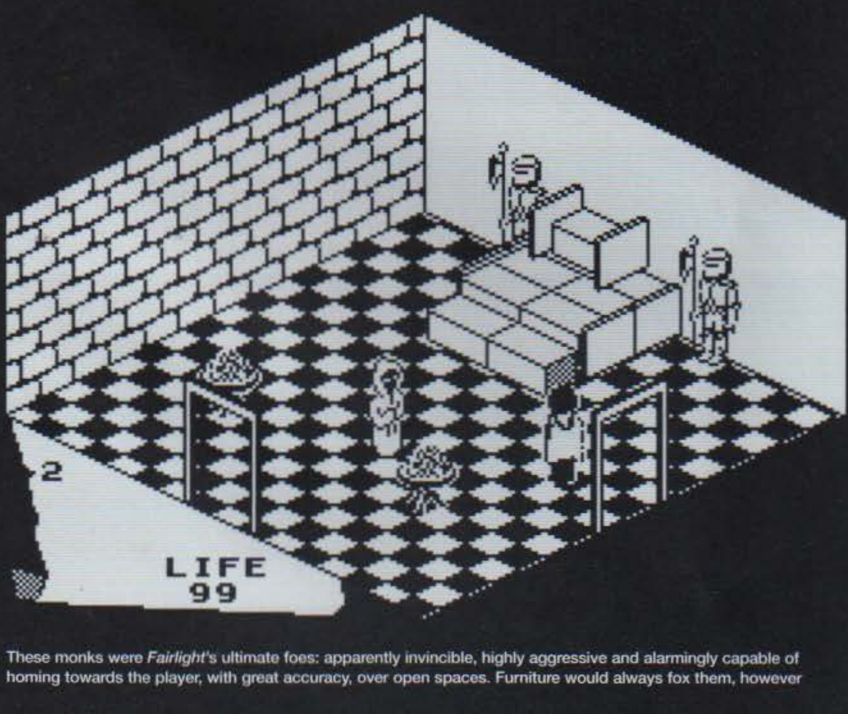
"I remember that I definitely wanted to create a castle," says Jangeborg. "I suppose my background in playing roleplaying games such as Dungeons & Dragons served as an inspiration, but mostly it just grew organically from what we did. Jack Wilkes, who did a lot of the graphics, also served as a good source of inspiration. Jack did the loading picture and most of the sprites and objects. I think he used The Artist to do them. I did the main character and the backgrounds."

You can't help but admire Jangeborg's ambition. This was his first game, he was working away from his country of origin, and he was lodging with his manager and taskmaster. There are some elements of *Fairlight* that clearly demonstrate his lack of experience at the time, though. Principally, it wa prone to horrendous slowdown on certain screens – when there was more than one item moving around there would be a clear change of pace. Similarly, the black screens as GRAX drew each area were jarring. Its keyboard layout – non-definable, too, a terrible transgression – was also far from refined.

Oddly, though, one element of *Fairlight* that might have instigated greater criticism was either mentioned in passing or completely overlooked: after its initial faux-two-channel opening theme, the game was played in complete silence. "I really had no experience in writing games, and getting an interrupt-driven sound system working with the sprite engine at the time would have been a daunting task," Jangeborg admits. "It didn't seem to be a problem. I've spoken t people since, and they seem surprised that *Fairlight* didn't have any sound – they don't remember it that way. In a sense, it was probably better to have no sound than bad sounds, although I probably would have used bad sound if I could have done so..."

Having populated his maps with Jack Wilkes' assailants – including soldiers, man-eating plants and 'bubbles' that, through a clever use of sprite masking, were transparent - Jangeborg gave *Fairlight* an elementary combat system. There was a distinct knack to it (or so thos who wished to complete the game soon realised): flee. Each contact with an adversary led to the loss of

"I remember that I definitely wanted to create a castle. I suppose my background in playing roleplaying games such as Dungeons & Dragons served as an inspiration"



These monks were *Fairlight*'s ultimate foes: apparently invincible, highly aggressive and alarmingly capable of homing towards the player, with great accuracy, over open spaces. Furniture would always fox them, however

energy, even while attacking. For that reason, it was often easier to steer clear whenever possible. "That's one of the things that I liked about it: that you didn't have to kill everything to complete the game – you could just avoid them," Jangeborg comments.

So was he happy with this combat system? "Not really," he replies. "It worked, but was too simplistic. I had ideas for a more complex system, like those used in roleplaying games, but I just didn't have the time. I kept it simple."

Although the game's visual panache would in time lose its lustre and, inevitably, be surpassed – beauty being a fleeting attribute in videogames – we have an abiding admiration for *Fairlight*'s early attempt at a 'realistic' physics engine. While furniture in most adventure games for years to follow was invariably fixed to the spot and interactive in a limited sense, if at all, Jangeborg imbued the majority of *Fairlight*'s objects with mass.

Players could build a pile of objects to reach a high point, use a table to push adversaries into a corner before running towards the exit, or push things around simply because they could.

Jangeborg remembers the story of one player collecting every helmet dropped by *Fairlight*'s soldiers and placing them in an enormous pile in one room just to see what would happen. The answer? Not much, bar a strange virtual sculpture and the GRAX engine slowing to a crawl, but he apparently had fun trying. Jangeborg had already considered such eventualities. "It wasn't that hard to program," he says of *Fairlight*'s object system. "It took a bit of debugging to make sure the players didn't muck things up…"

Although certain tasks had to be completed in order to finish it, *Fairlight* was also pleasingly freeform for its era. "There wasn't one particular way to play or complete it, there were a number of ways to get through," agrees Jangeborg. We recall the example of a seemingly invincible cowled figure that guarded a narrow bridge. This figure would attempt to push protagonist Isvar off to his death, and Game Over. The actual idea was to dispose of this enemy with a potion found elsewhere, but you could also, if you were nimble, cause it to plunge to its doom. Oddly enough, Jangeborg recalls a solution that, due to the hooded enemy's propensity for homing in, might not have occurred to players at the time. "You could also run past him without fighting," he advises. "You had to be quick, but it was possible."



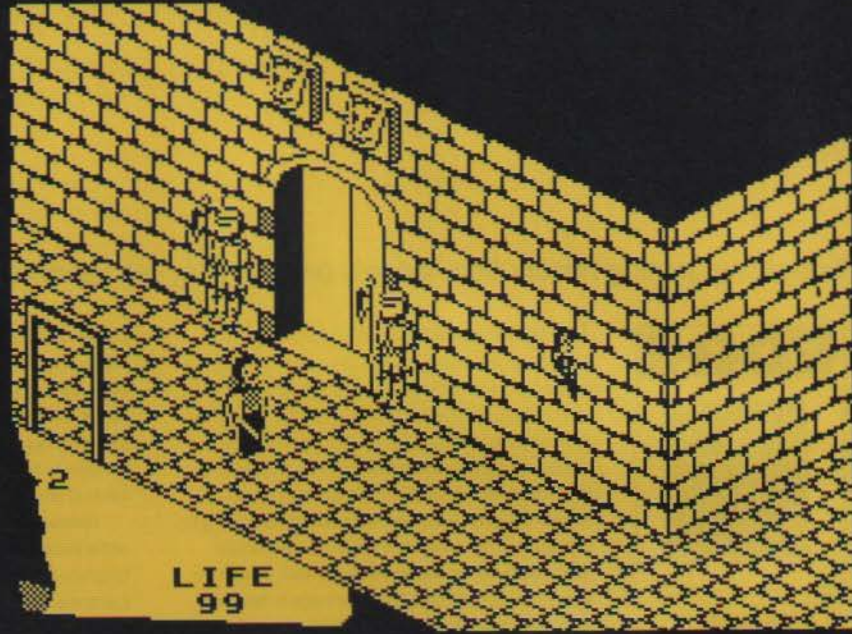
Fairlight's loading screen contained an important clue: the wizard's location

Press praise

So, seven months after what was originally intended to be a one-week visit to the UK, *Fairlight* was completed and sent for duplication. "I really didn't know what to expect. I was just glad to have finished it," admits Jangeborg.

The gaming press were fulsome in their praise. "Wow, amazing, brill, trif, fab, awesome and other such noises… I've never seen a game that looks as good as this," enthused a 'Crash' writer in a typical review, awarding it 95 per cent – a score not given lightly by the staff of a magazine then at its prime.

Topping the charts and selling over 50,000 copies in its time (a not-inconsiderable feat given its high-end £9.95 RRP), Jangeborg's adventure might have marked the beginning of a stellar career in game development. Sadly, a contractual dispute led to his parting ways with The Edge before *Fairlight II* was

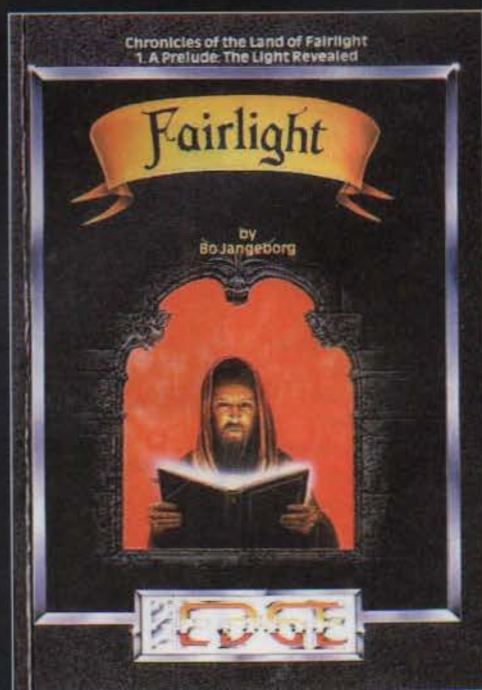


For its time, *Fairlight* was truly beautiful to behold. Aesthetically, it seemed to have everything – and over 80 screens. The differentiation from Ultimate's games lay in its filling of screen space, delivering a more solid feel

finished, and Jangeborg regards the released version of the disappointing sequel as being incomplete. Greater misfortune was to follow. "The next company I hooked up with turned out to be run by a crooked boss who scammed his partners," he laments. "I didn't suffer financially, but it made me wonder about the English software industry as a whole. I did sign on with BT after that, but the game I was developing was probably too technically difficult to make, so I cancelled that contract."

Jangeborg now runs his own company, Softwave, and still works as a programmer – "mainly a payroll system at the moment," he explains – and looks back on his time working on *Fairlight* with fondness: "Despite what followed later I regard it as a very exciting time, and Covent Garden was very nice."

We can't help wondering what might have occurred had Jangeborg signed with a heavyweight publisher, an Ocean or a US Gold, or even looked towards the re-emergence of game consoles (as Ultimate's Stamper brothers did). It's fair to say that after *Fairlight* the industry lost a promising talent.

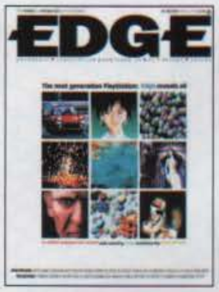


Way back in 1985, not many game programmers could boast of getting their names printed on the packaging of their work

RESET

Where yesterday's gaming goes to have a lie down

Examining gaming history from **Edge**'s perspective, five years ago this month



Issue 70, April 1999

The opening words of **E**70, from head of SquareSoft **Tomoyuki Takechi**: "No more than five software companies can develop games that take full advantage of the PlayStation2's capabilities." Five years on, and we're still waiting to find out which companies he meant – although SquareSoft probably isn't one of them, given its a-few-polys-more approach to the format. The cover was even more bullish, attempting to create a new buzzword for the last-next-generation. "Sony redefines the superconsole," it read, though we can understand the industry's reluctance to take that particular term on board. After all, where does that leave the generation after? Hyper-superconsole-plus-two-alpha, and we've all turned into Capcom.

"Can a games machine actually be too powerful? Of course not," continued the editorial intro, dismissing a vision of the future where pincer-legged PS2s stalk the earth, picking off puny humans with snaking DualShock cables and flinging them into chewing CD drives with the same rough cruelty the PS2 would genuinely show for soon-to-be-scarred shop-bought games. The real future of gaming was even more chilling, though.

Despite a three-page preview of Sega's *Crazy Taxi*, and a fascinating interview with geek pinup John Carmack, the magazine headed west for a preview of *Daikatana*, and Ion Storm's vice-president of marketing was rather candid. "I think the rudder on this ship had holes in it," **Mike Breslin** admitted. "We've patched them up and I think our games are going to speak for themselves." Spot on, Mike. Spot on.

DID EDGE REALLY SAY THAT?

"Created by unknown Japanese codeshop SpuriSoft, the new program is certain to prompt a swift response from Sony's lawyers. Using Dreamcast's WinCE operating system, Spuri has managed to build a stable and reliable PlayStation emulator, dubbed Spuri OS." **Edge**'s '99 April fool second-guesses Bleemcast.

DID THEY REALLY SAY THAT?

"It's a totally awesome game, but we're really confident our game is better." Jon Romero, at the time working on making you his bitch, comments on *Half-Life*. Oh, *Daikatana*...

TESTSCREENS AND RATINGS:

Powerstone (DC; 9/10); *Silent Hill* (PS; 8/10), *Castlevania* (N64; 6/10), *Silver* (PC; 7/10), *Wild Metal Country* (PC, DC; 7/10), *Lander* (PC; 7/10), *Warzone 2100* (PC; 7/10), *Civilisation: Call to Power* (PC; 9/10), *Bloody Roar 2* (PS; 6/10)


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1. "Let's go make some craaaazy money!" – Sega's big yellow taxi arrives
2. *Ape Escape*, the first DualShock-only game
3. A Glimpse Of The Future: the tagline for Sony's 1999 PlayStation meeting on which **E**70 would be based
4. *Zombie Revenge*: "Another sterling Sega effort" **Edge** reported
5. Square's motion-captured dance demo featuring *Final Fantasy VIII* characters
6. Dominik Diamond in a feature on gaming TV
7. Sexy JC 8. Romero's post-id project gets its first examination for a while
9. *Super 3D Noah's Ark*, the star of a quirky feature on little-known gaming curios

inbox

Communicate by post:
Letters, **Edge**, 30 Monmouth Street, Bath BA1 2BW
Or email (stating 'Inbox' in the message header):
edge@futurenet.co.uk

I was in my local videogame shop recently and saw something that shocked me enough to write in. As I entered, I noticed that *Vice City* was on the big screens. That surprised me a bit because of its obvious content and 18 certificate. However, I thought, maybe I'm being prudish and let it slide.

I then noticed at the counter a middle-aged mother with a copy of *Vice City* in one hand and her son, who could have been no older than seven or eight, in the other.

As she handed over the game to the assistant he said, "Are you aware that this is an adult game?" to which she replied, "He knows not to say any of the words in it." Whilst looking at her son, the assistant then proceeded without a second thought to process the purchase.

I was dumbfounded. I realise there is ignorance and a lack of knowledge amongst the majority of mothers towards videogames, therefore she can be partially forgiven. However, for the shop to allow the purchase of a game like this, knowing full well who will be playing it, is not forgivable.

It may have been legal (I'm not sure of the exact laws), but one thing I am sure of is the shop's complete lack of morals. I'm not for one minute criticising Rockstar – *Vice City* is no doubt one of the best games of last year, and should be enjoyed by all of an appropriate age. But the effect this game may have on those less mature is still questionable. At 21 I have a good idea of what is right and wrong and obviously know where the game ends and reality begins. However, it makes me shudder to think of the effect it may have had on me had I been exposed to such a game when I was seven or eight.

If we are to try and rid our hobby of one of its many points of criticism, children cannot be allowed to get hold of such games so easily. Videogames get enough negative press without us shooting ourselves in the foot.

The problem needs to be tackled by educating parents about such games (I doubt this particular mother would allow her young son to watch an 18-certificate movie, for example), and tightening the distribution of such titles.

If it is made clear that these types of games are for adults, we may get less negative press similar to The Mail on Sunday's hysterical article on *Manhunt*. A game, by the way, that features nothing that hasn't been seen hundreds of times on the cinema screen. So why the outrage at the images being in a game? Because they are still seen as being kids' toys.

We may not be able to stop this type of press completely – there will always be sensationalist journalists – but we can help ourselves.
Lee Hawley

The shop scenario you describe is clearly ludicrous, but we're led to believe that the assistant had no option. Perhaps this may change in the future, although we're hardly banking on it.

I'm writing with regard to Andy Shearer's view in **E**133 – that games are not being completed because they are 'not difficult, just too big'. He assumes that many people would happily accept buying *The Wind Waker* twice if it was to be released in two parts, much like the disappointing and frankly boring 'Kill Bill'. I for one would not be a happy bunny if Nintendo decided to release *The Wind Waker* in two parts, mainly because of the fact that it's not that hard and it's not that big. The game takes 20 hours at most with all the basics, and probably around 40 hours if the completist in you wanted to enjoy every last globule of a brilliant Nintendo game. Now consider this: most games take about 30-40 hours to complete (well, most games should, anyway). If these games were to be cut short to about 20 hours, and assuming the game cost £40, that's £2 per hour of play. To me, that does not represent value for money.

Comparing games to films in terms of length does seem to be scraping the barrel ever so slightly. If audiences were charged £40 to see 'Kill Bill Volume One', I doubt that it would have been the commercial success that it has been. Also, splitting the game into two parts doesn't really shorten the game, does it? It'll still be the same game, but with an annoying disc change in the middle. And as for the wonderful analogy of 'It's a bit like being presented with a huge meal in the States – it puts you off eating at all,' it all depends how hungry you are, doesn't it?
Duncan Voice

Andy Shearer's letter in issue 133 highlighted a dilemma as far as game developmen is concerned. He stated that some games in his collection remain uncompleted, simply because they are too big. This is certainly a problem for some gamers, but it is important to note that it is not a problem for others.

I do not play many games these days, but those that I do play are selected for the experienc that they provide. I like to be immersed in virtual worlds, with interesting storylines, detailed locations, and plenty of atmosphere. When a gam achieves this, the last thing that I want to happen i for the game to end quickly.

November 2000 to October 2001: taking 11 months to complete a game may well be an alien concept to the vast majority of gamers, but that is how long it took me to work my way through *Deus Ex* from start to finish. And do you know what? I loved every minute of it. I never worried about how long it was taking me to play the game. I never worried that I would get bored. The experience was far too good to worry about things like that.

In fact, the only thing that I do worry about is whether I will ever get another chance to spend 1 months on a fantastic gaming experience again.
Christopher Low

In the same way movies have an average running time, surely mainstream games will also one day settle on an 'ideal' length. In fact, it's happening already, with many developers settling on ten hour as a reasonable figure. We'll keep an eye on this...

I would like to diverge from the current topic being discussed in your pages and turn to a

"Comparing games to films in terms of length does seem to b scraping the barrel. If audiences were charged £40 to see Kill Bill, I doubt it would have been such a commerical success"



Ian Shaw wonders why more games cannot take a more adult approach to sex and nudity, as Rotobee is attempting with its *Sims*-style PC game *Singles*

different subject having seen the screenshots of *Singles: Flirt Up Your Life*.

This game promises a subject matter lacking, or avoided, within the games industry: sex and nudity. Quite why such aspects are shunned by developers and kept out of games is actually hard to pinpoint without falling into tired stereotypes of the average gamer, especially considering that in other forms of entertainment sex is commonplace and accepted as 'that's how it is in the real world'. It's amazing that films that border on soft pornography, such as the 'Carry On' series, can become national institutions, but games such as *Lula* are seen as 'sweaty palm' territory, even though *Singles* appears to be handled in a mature and confident manner.

Whether *Singles* turns out to be solid and enjoyable or puerile titillation remains to be seen, but it would be a fair bet that it will be dismissed as the latter, regardless of its merits.

It will be interesting to see how it performs upon release. If it sells well then it would intriguing to see if the media and gamers alike put it down to 'sex sells' or upon the merits of the game. If it performs badly and was not down simply to shoddy workmanship then it would be fair to say that it would be because players were too embarrassed to buy it.

It's interesting: gamers cry out for more maturity in the form of blood and guts, but are they mature enough to be able to go to the local store and pick up *Singles* without fretting about people thinking it was for a 'one-handed' session? Perhaps the greatest indicator of the general consensus is the lack of such games; is it because companies still see it as taboo?

Or is it because they still see their audience as people outside of the gaming world do? Is it the case that the makers, the media and the general public need to change their attitudes, or the gamers themselves?

Me? I can live without the nudity, the violence and the gore, and would infinitely prefer a game to offer accomplished design and interesting propositions, rather than treating me like the clichéd loner or the excitable kid. I don't want to be patronised or insulted, and I think gamers as a whole feel the same way.

Ian Shaw

Alex W, Amazon reviews (Inbox, **E**134) 'written for love not money' still stands as accurate because if you examine the dates on each review, the insane fanboy scribblings aren't always clustered around the same period, which they would be if it were a scramble for a voucher.

Oddly they seem to be in flux, too. I have noticed reviews vanish on occasion and titles vary – the next *GTA* title was for a time labelled *GTA: Sin City* (when it was being called that in the press) but then it reverted to *GTA: Next Episode*.

The reviews have a certain comedic value, though. One of the best was for *Driver 3*, with one chap concluding that this 'will be the best game I ever played,' almost six months before anything but prerendered shots were out.

Aonghus de Barra

In response to Alex O'Brien, **E**134, it is a nice idea, having games with deep and meaningful stories, games with a 'profound impact' or 'social insight' capable of commanding critical and public respect. It is an idea that I am sure most people reading this magazine hope to see realised someday. The problem is that I can't see it happening as the depth that you are looking for is simply not compatible with interactive gameplay.

Take *Ico* and *Shenmue*, two of the most emotional gaming experiences on the shelves and probably two of Alex's favourites. Both games are truly stunning to look at, have wonderfully realised characters, and feature some of the most simplistic gameplay yet seen. The most common complaints I hear about them? 'The combat's is too basic,' or 'the game is too linear.' To ensure that these games would be a good medium for their stories, the gameplay had to be stripped down to the bare bones. Judging by the sales of these games, that is too large a sacrifice for most gamers. I actually feel that there are plenty of other games out there with good stories, they just tend to get lost behind countless failed stealth attempts, random battles and missed pick-ups.

It seems that games are simply not capable of visualising a story as well as a film or of telling a story as well as a book. This does not mean that our games are inferior, but instead of waiting for computer games to emulate the artistic merits of other entertainment mediums, we should just be showing the rest of the world the worth of gameplay in titles like *Ikaruga*, *Animal Crossing* and *Street Fighter II*.

Brian Ashford

Or is it that game designers simply aren't as skilled as traditional authors in terms of telling stories?

I'm sure I'm not the first person to ask, but I spotted the coordinates in the front of the magazine. According to Autoroute, the location seems to be off the A36 just north west of Warminster. Is there something exciting there I should know about? Is there a prize or just disappointment at the end of the rainbow? I am intrigued but it's too far away from where I live for me to just go to to see a billboard advertisement. Can you shed any light on the situation?

Scott Hammond

Warminster? Close, but no prize for you.

In issue 133's Continue/Quit section, you stated: 'Quit: UK's Sexiest Gamer – Try-hards. Next up: UK's Sexiest Stamp Collector!' Well, I'd just like to let you know that I was one of the UK male finalists, and I have never tried hard at anything. I had a good go at drinking as much free booze as I could, and I was rude to several PR and marketing people, but these are skills I have acquired over time, and require no effort on my behalf.

G Pollard

"Gamers cry out for more maturity in the form of blood and guts, but are they mature enough to pick up Singles without fretting that people would think it's for a one-handed session?"

Next month





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